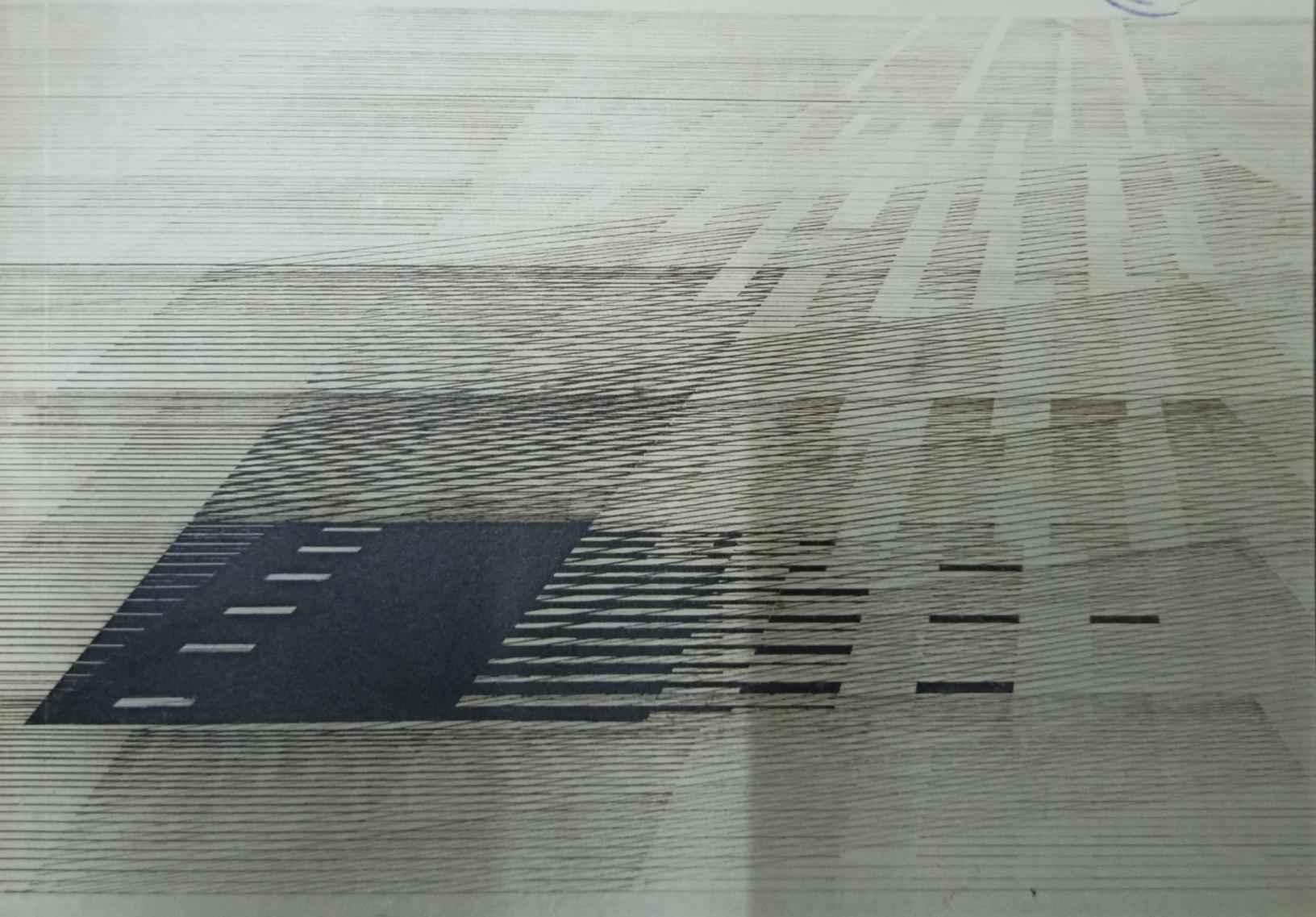


NASREEN MOHAMED: THE VASTNESS, AGAIN & AGAIN
CURATED BY PUJA VAISH



Cover: Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. 1975 – 1980s, ink on paper board, 20 x 28 in,

Collection: Sikander and Hydari

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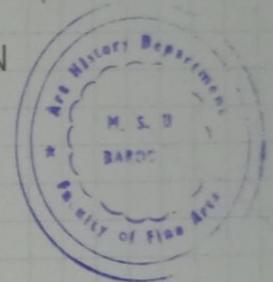
JEHANGIR NICHOLSON ART FOUNDATION

CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ VASTU SANGRAHALAYA

Presented to the
Department of Art History &
Aesthetics

From
Puja Vaish
on behalf of J.N.A.F

27/12/2023



NASREEN MOHAMEDI: THE VASTNESS, AGAIN & AGAIN

CURATED BY PUJA VAISH

31 JANUARY - 28 MAY 2023

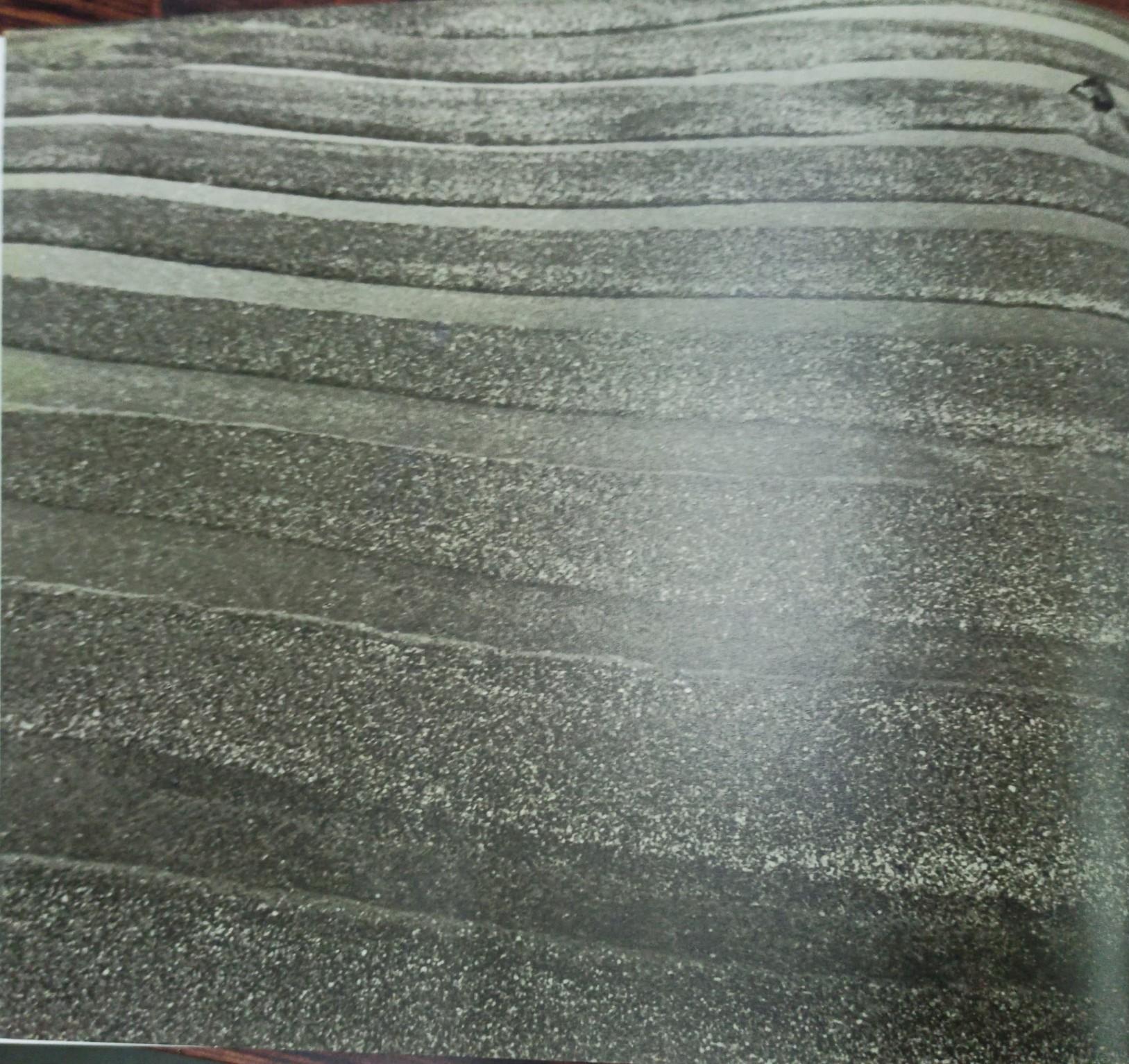


101
YEARS



Installation view of Nasreen Mohamedi: The Vastness, Again & Again





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FOREWORD

CYRUS GUZDER | Trustee, JNAF

On behalf of the Trustees and staff at Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, we are delighted to present the exhibition '*Nasreen Mohamedi: The Vastness, Again & Again*', curated by JNAF's Director, Puja Vaish. The catalogue accompanies the exhibition which was on display at the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, from 31st January to 28th May 2023.

We are fortunate to have, in the late Jehangir Nicholson's collection, two unique works of Nasreen Mohamedi – a rare early portrait drawing and a celebrated line work, which Nicholson collected during his lifetime in the 1990s.

We must acknowledge that this major exhibition has been made possible by the generosity of Nasreen Mohamedi's family – the Sikanders, Hydaris and Dossals - for lending us a majority

of the works and the archival material featured in the show. Other splendid works have also been loaned for the exhibition by Priyam & Gayatri Jhaveri, Pinakin Patel (of the Dashrath Patel Museum), Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, and other Private Collectors – and to all of them we express our gratitude.

Thanks to this rich selection, this will be the first major exhibition in Mumbai of Nasreen Mohamedi's works in 32 years since her retrospective in 1991, a year after she passed away. With 65 artworks, the exhibition features both her early works, drawings, graphics, ink works and canvases; an archival section, which comprises some of Mohamedi's photographs, process drawings and studio notes, as well as works by some of her contemporaries. The JNAF is grateful to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Director General,

Mr. Sabyasachi Mukherjee and the staff of the CSMVS for all the help and support extended to us in our efforts to mount this ambitious exhibition.

The catalogue features notes by the curator as well as essays and interviews with those who knew Nasreen Mohamedi closely during her lifetime.

Nasreen Mohamedi led a fascinating life, which involved spending some of her earlier years with her family in Bahrain, thereafter, studying in London and Paris, then joining the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute in Mumbai – where she met, among many others, V S Gaitonde and Tyeb Mehta – till she settled in Baroda where she taught Fine Art at the M.S. University Baroda, until her death.

What intrigues me is that, though she acknowledged Gaitonde as among her mentors, and she worked in such close proximity with several other artists of the Bombay Progressive Group (who form the core of the Jehangir

Nicholson Collection), Mohamedi evolved her own distinctive style in her Baroda years, exemplified by her now well-appreciated, carefully ruled line-drawings based on grid patterns (which are concerned with space and geometry); a personal vocabulary that has made it difficult to categorise her work.

Whether in her earlier works that recall Chinese and Japanese calligraphy; or in her collages and canvases, or in the increasing monochrome palette and, finally, the severe discipline of her line-drawings, she seemed to adhere to her maxim - "The maximum out of the minimum."

In fact, the opening quotation in the first plaque of the exhibition carries a notation from one of Nasreen Mohamedi's diaries, which reads "...in this utter chaos, a thread of discipline – a cobweb", of which the exhibition gives us a glimpse.

Her photographs are just as revealing. In Geeta Kapur's words, they are "abstracted to the point of becoming non-representational....

somewhere between the artistic and the real.... creating an allegory of (dis)placement between the subject and the object."

I will conclude by alluding to Professor Homi K Bhabha's observations about this aspect of 'displacement' in Nasreen Mohamedi's works. In his inaugural Jehangir Nicholson Memorial Lecture delivered at the CSMVS Museum in 2015, he contended that Nasreen Mohamedi, in her works, exemplifies the most abstract articulation of this problem of placement and (dis)placement and quotes her own words: "A dot changes the entire surface and with that, the phenomenon takes shape, in a direction which enlarges the idea, until it reaches "destination" would not be the right word-as there is no end..." - Nasreen Mohamedi

Professor Bhabha goes on to say that in drawing lines, a line, or a dot, Mohamedi gives the dot "the freedom to extend the drawn line to whatever length the artist decides, an enlargement, without reaching closure or summation, so that even "without an end" becomes a kind of destination."

As you view the catalogue of the exhibition, we hope that you will allow your imagination to travel along those lines that Nasreen Mohamedi has drawn, to reach – each of you – your own destinations.

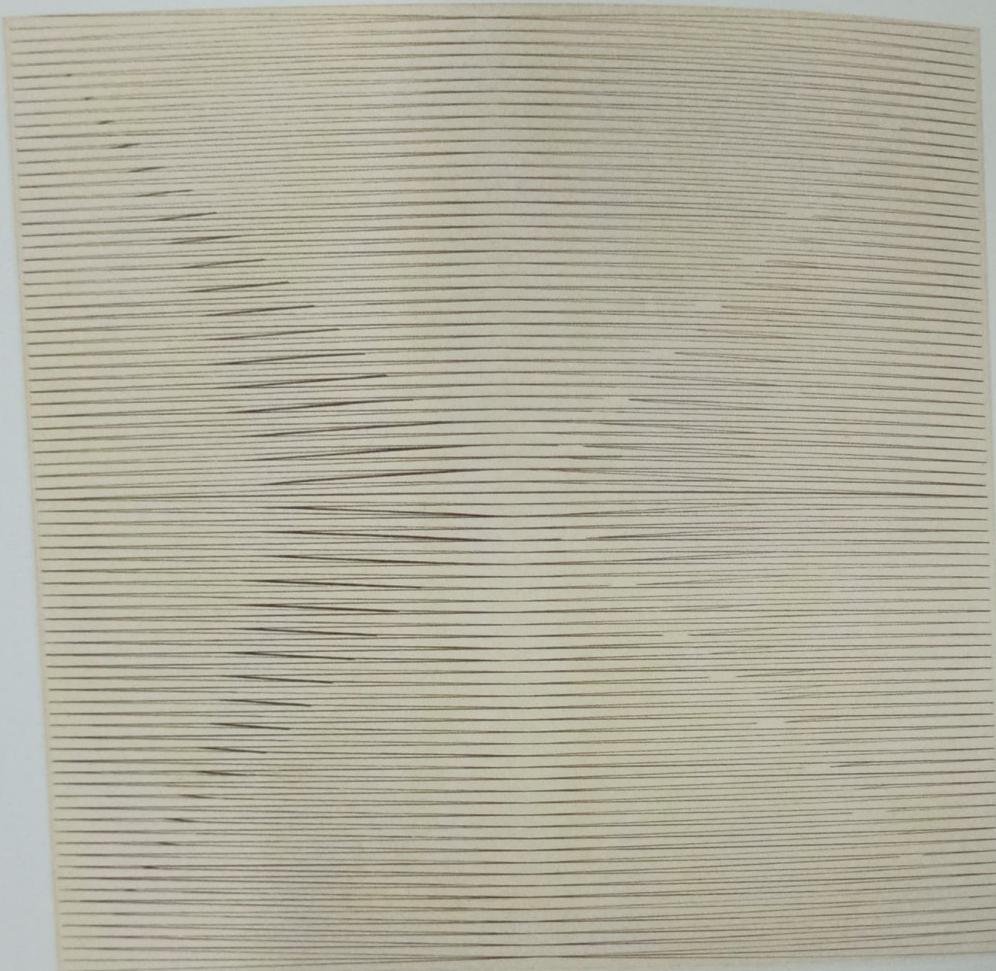


...g 26.2].
intersecting diagonally, which
...miedi's works from the 1970s and 1980s are the result of
the gradual elimination of representational elements. Returning
...here she was a student at St. Martin's
...Bombay

Left: Untitled, ca. 1970s, ink on paper, 18.75 x 18.75 in
Collection: Dossal Family

Right: Untitled, ink on paper, ca. 1975 – 1980s, 19 x 26.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

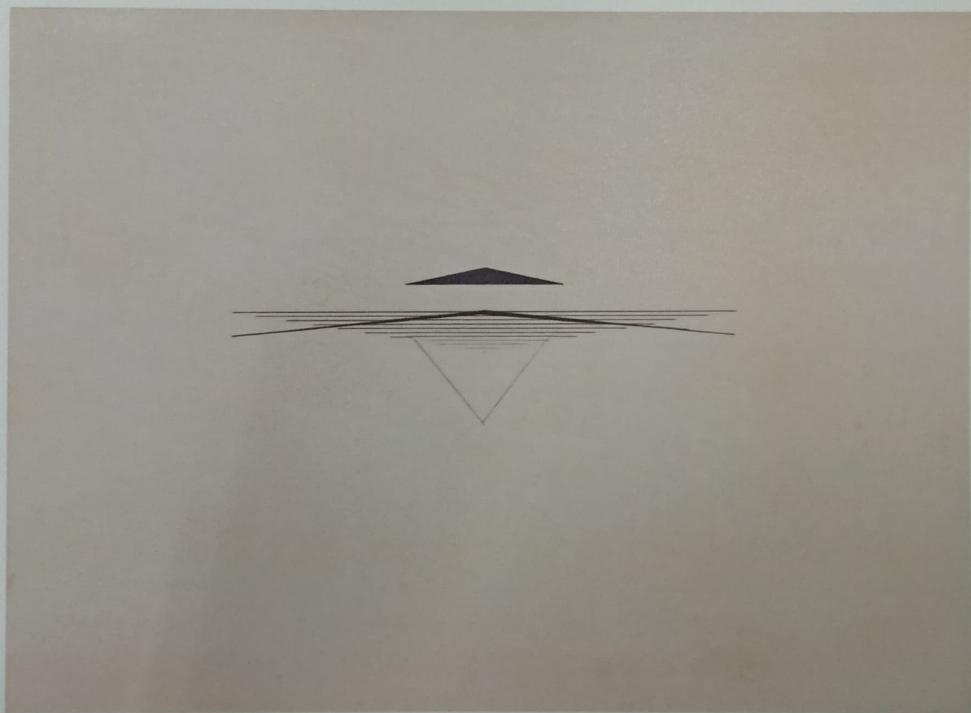




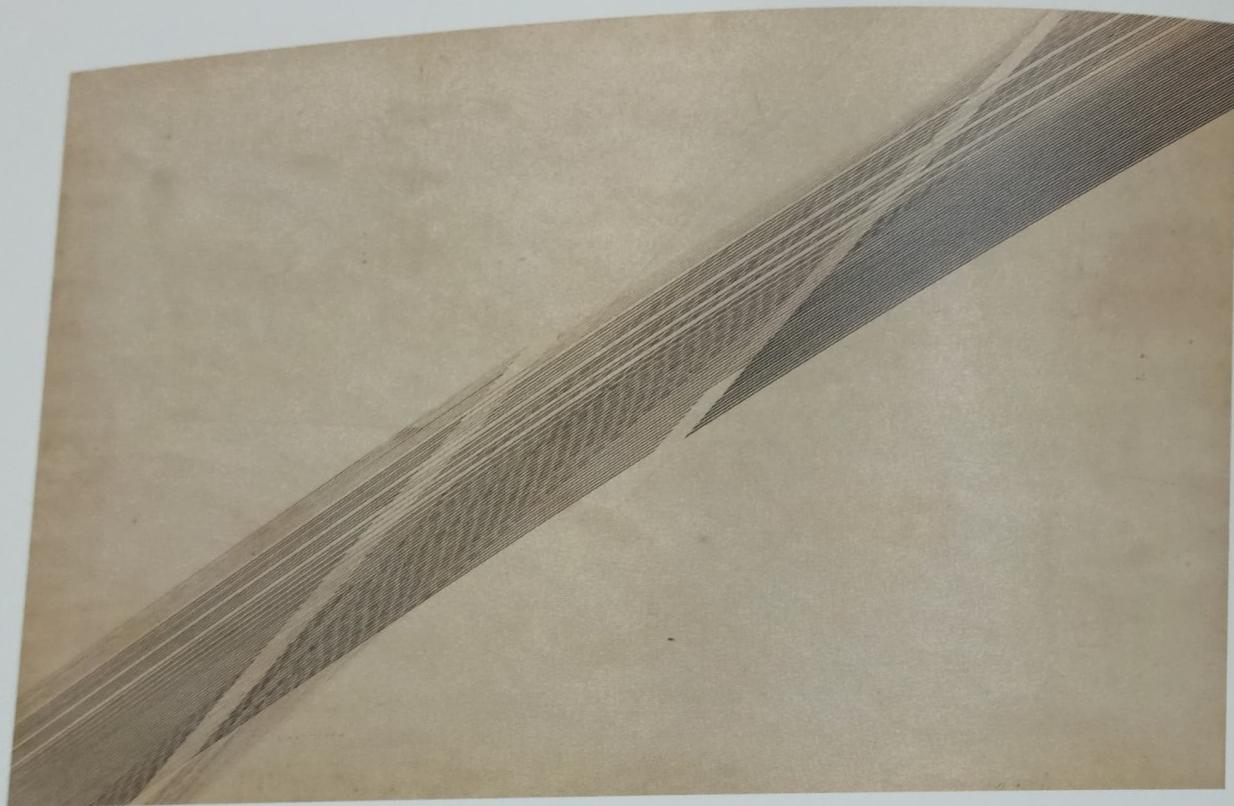
London, where she was a student at St. Martin's
and 1988, she moved to Bombay
with abstract

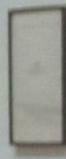
Left: Untitled, ca. 1970s, ink on paper, 20 x 20 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydarl

Right: Untitled, ca. late 1980s, ink and graphite on paper, 10.5 x 13.25 in
Collection: Dossal Family



Untitled, ca. 1975 - BD, ink and graphite on paper, 20 x 28 in
Private Collection





RECEDING HAVING SPACES - ARE FILLED WITH INTRICATE FORMS - BOTH STEPPED LEFT AND RECEIVING INTO EACH OTHER - THE HORIZON BEING THE CROISSANT OF LINES - ALL ENRICHED A WHOLE

and V. S. Gaitonde [see Chapter 11], with whom she
took on a studio in the Bh



NASREEN MOHAMEDI - THE VASTNESS, AGAIN & AGAIN

PUJA VAISH | Curator of the exhibition & Director, JNAF

'In this utter chaos a thread of discipline - a cobweb' - Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990)

A magic occurs while observing Nasreen Mohamedi's work, as the flat paper surface opens out shifting dimensions. Patterns emerge from light gradations and soft shadows, from the *'filigree in water'*², designs moulded by the sea, the traces of minuscule patterns in sand by scurrying crabs, the gradual dissolution of ice, or how the geometry of a spider's web catches the light and reveals itself.

The infinite fleeting configurations in nature captured Mohamedi's imagination. Her receptivity to the mysticism of the natural world and its changing realities aligns with Zen Buddhist philosophy, Sufism and Taoism.

While cultural specificities of place and time are effaced in her work, Mohamedi had a

unique way of drawing from her surroundings. Her work philosophises the contemplative landscapes of the desert and the sea. Her notes and photographs from travels to Turkey, Iran, Bahrain, Fatehpur Sikri and Corbusier's Chandigarh speak of the essences of design and space in architecture and landscape.

Concepts of the secular and a troubled religious co-existence held in delicate balance have characterised post-Partition India. Perhaps, the unique detachment in Mohamedi's work and her interest in Sufism and existentialist thought, especially in the writings of Albert Camus, may be read alongside these realities. Mohamedi's diary entries read, *'A spectacular virtue that leads to deny one's passions. A higher virtue that leads to balancing them. Camus notebooks, 1951. I watch the world around me with greater clarity, detachment and understanding of the inner balance'*³

Untitled, ca. 1960 – 1970, ink and watercolour on paper, 7.5 x 8.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

¹ Nasreen Mohamedi, diary entry, March 28, 1971, *Nasreen in Retrospect*, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, 1995

² Ibid, January 7, 1969. ³Ibid, May 29, 1971, Bombay

'War continues - I sit here and try and find a unity - not between religions but between people and people'.⁴

Monochromatic, meticulous and minimal, Mohamedi's works insist on a pause, a slowness that derives from observing the dynamic phenomena of the perceived world.

There was an authenticity in how Mohamedi merged life and art. The practice of the everyday - riyaaaz, repetition and dedication, is seen in her sequential line drawings and in the ascetic way that she arranged her working space.

In the last decade of her shortened life, despite failing health due to a degenerative neuro-muscular condition, Mohamedi trained her hand to conquer the bodily tremors, by working on a drafting table with a scale, pen and ink in her sparse and immaculate studio.

Mohamedi's works are mostly undated and untitled and were pieced together to survey her practice after she passed away. Mohamedi's

recent rise to prominence among the studies of Western and Indian abstraction provides an opportunity to question art historical categorization and encourage new ways of perceiving art.

Rather than viewing Nasreen Mohamedi's practice in isolation, this exhibition attempts to situate it within the artistic milieu of the time. The exhibition conjures Nasreen Mohamedi's legacy by setting up conversations within her own works and with the important art centres of Bombay and Baroda through artworks by some of her peers. Letters and photographs show the camaraderie she shared with colleagues and students which precipitated a mutual exchange of thoughts and concepts. Specific displays elucidate Mohamedi's pioneering experiments with photography, form and design in relation to other artists' works.

A rare home video exhibited for the first time, chips away at narrow visions of austerity associated with Mohamedi and speaks of a life of warmth, travel and colour.

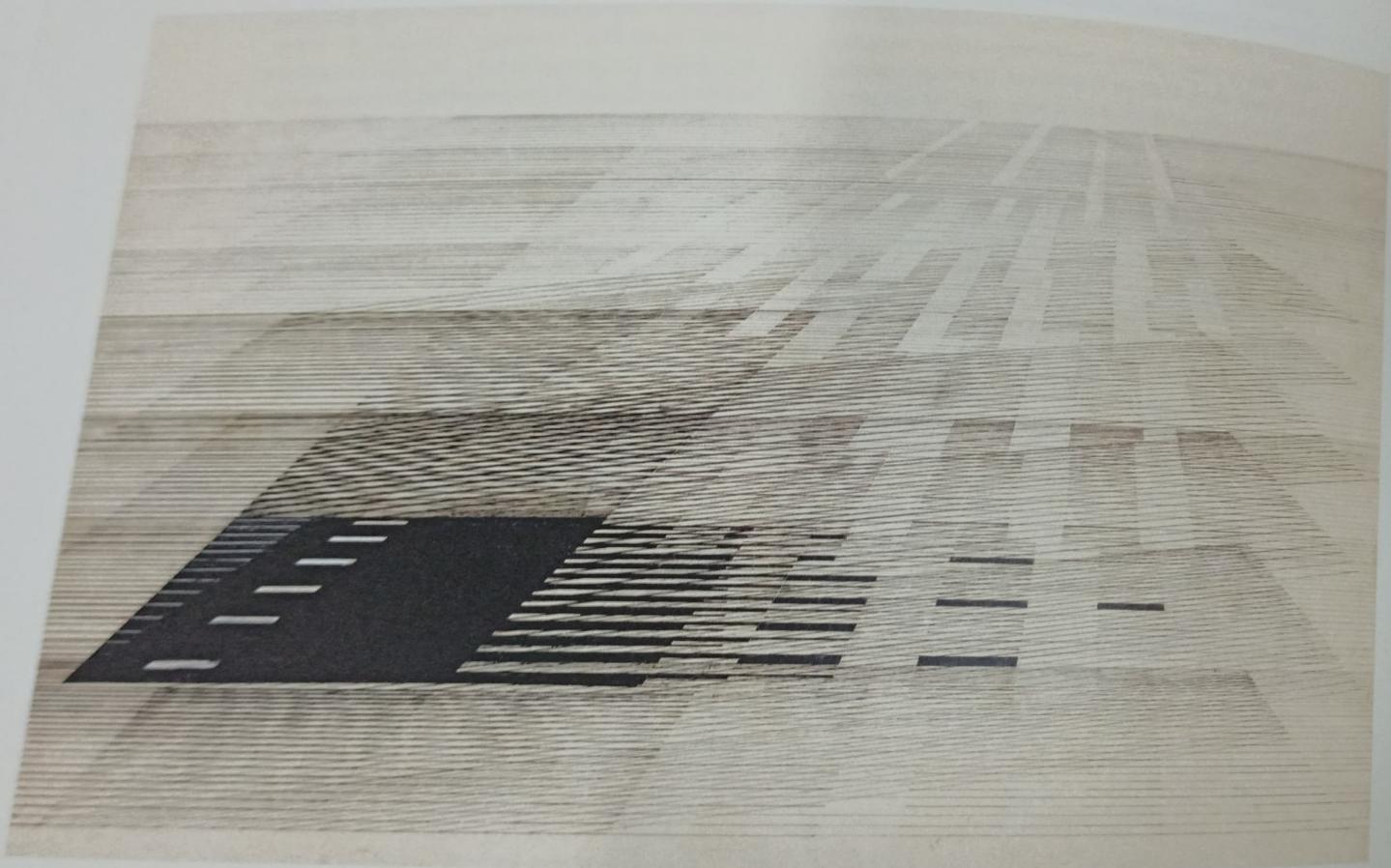
⁴Nasreen Mohamedi, diary entry, September 20, 1964, *Nasreen in Retrospect*, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, 1995

Archival sections of sketches, notes, references, press clippings and items found in the artist's studio are featured to present revelations about her work and process. Though it is usually believed that Mohamedi never titled her work, a newspaper clipping that she kept of an early show cites specific works with titles inspired from nature.

This exhibition has relied on research gathered from conversations with those who knew Mohamedi during her lifetime, including artists, friends, students and family members of the artist, as well as Mohamedi's own haiku-like diary notes that reflect the underlying formal and conceptual thought. While one may look for the feminine in Mohamedi's practice, a conversation with artist Nalini Malani revealed Mohamedi's clear position of not wanting to be "vernacularised as female", even declining to participate in an important women artists' exhibition (page 83). In a nascent art market and few exhibition venues, Mohamedi found opportunities to exhibit her work regularly. A clipping found in the artist's studio, a 1987

Times of India article written by art historian Geeta Kapur, is noteworthy as one of the earliest studies to contextualize Mohamedi's practice (page 134). The catalogue includes an essay by artist Gulammohamed Sheikh (originally written in Gujarati the year Mohamedi passed, translated into English for the exhibition), an account by artist and former student of Mohamedi's, Suresh BV, as well as excerpts from a conversation with artist Nalini Malani.

Since Mohamedi passed away at the age of fifty three and became a coveted artist several years after her death, much remains to be discovered, including exact dates, and in some cases the orientation for her known works. This exhibition features several works and archives that have not been shown before. It attempts to demystify aspects of Mohamedi's life and work, while looking at frameworks through which one could explore the artist's complex practice.



Left: Untitled, ca. 1975 - 80, ink on paper board, 20 x 28 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

Right: Untitled, ca. 1975 - 80, ink and graphite on paper , 9.5 x 9.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





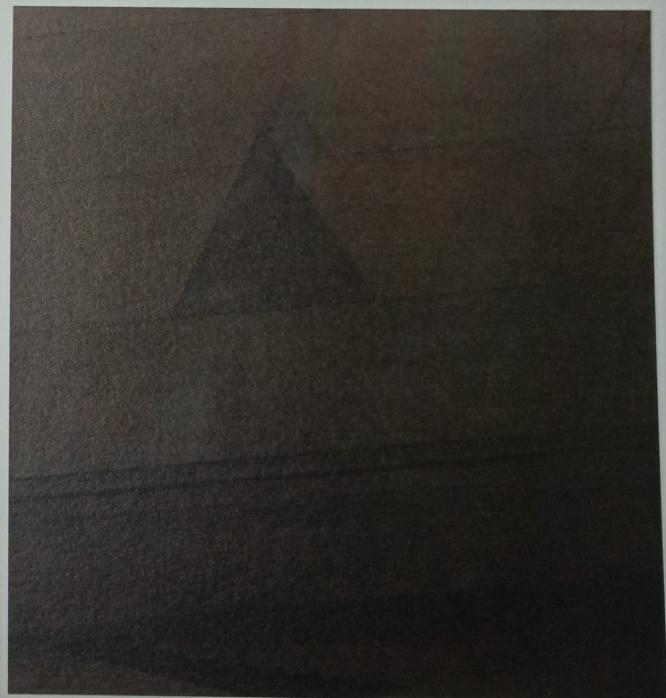
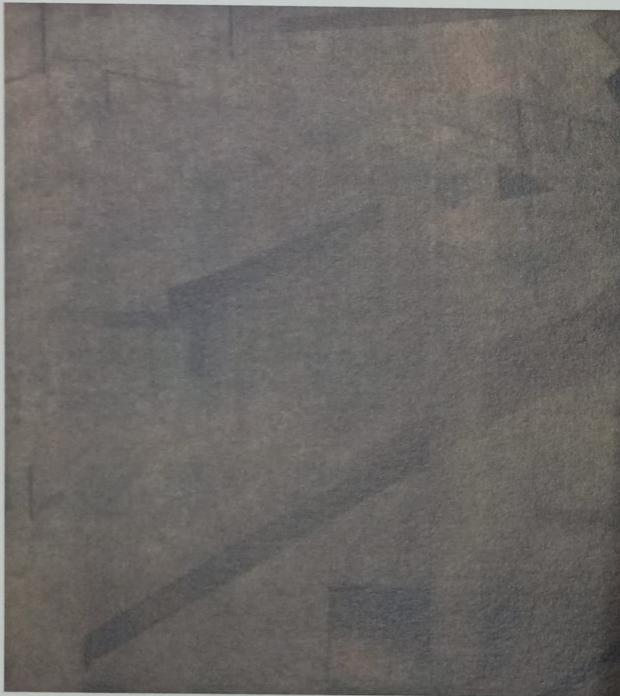
Left to right:

Untitled, ca. 1980s, ink and graphite on paper, 18.5 x 26 in

Untitled, ca. 1970s, ink, watercolour and collage on paper, 17 x 17 in

Untitled, ca. 1970s, ink on paper board, 19 x 19 in

Collection: Sikander and Hydari



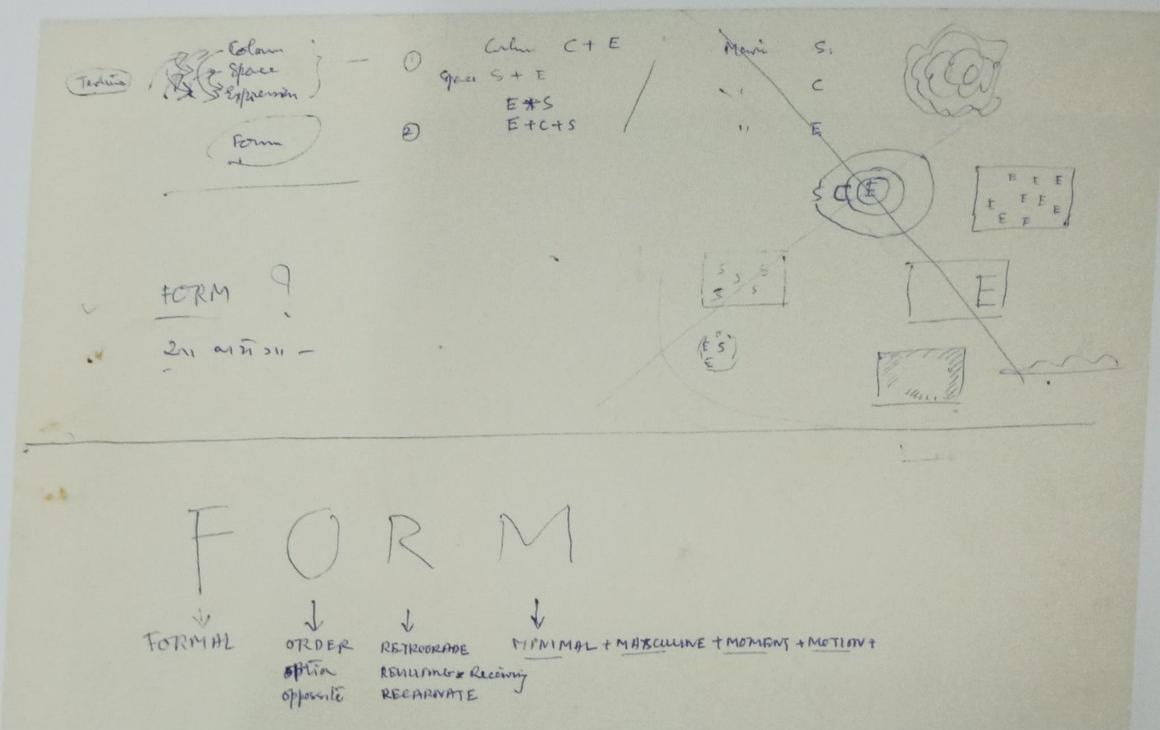
Left: Untitled, ca. 1950s – 1980s, photograph b/w, vintage silver gelatin print, 9 x 11 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

Right & page 4: Untitled, ca. 1950s – 1980s, photograph b/w, vintage silver gelatin print, 9.5 x 14.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



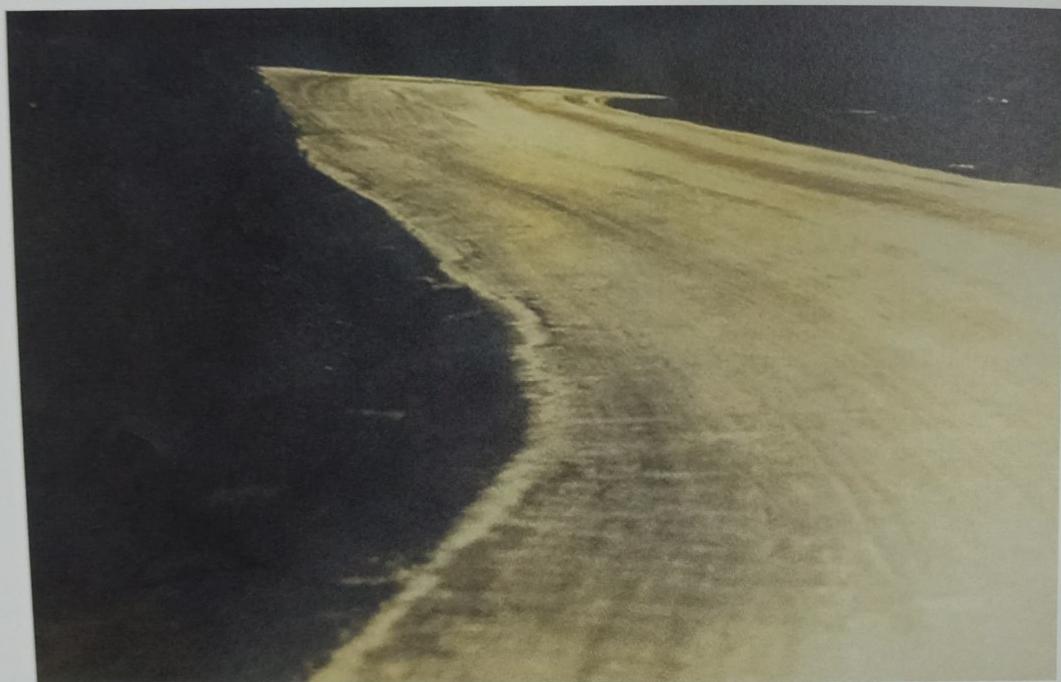


Note found in Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives





Installation view



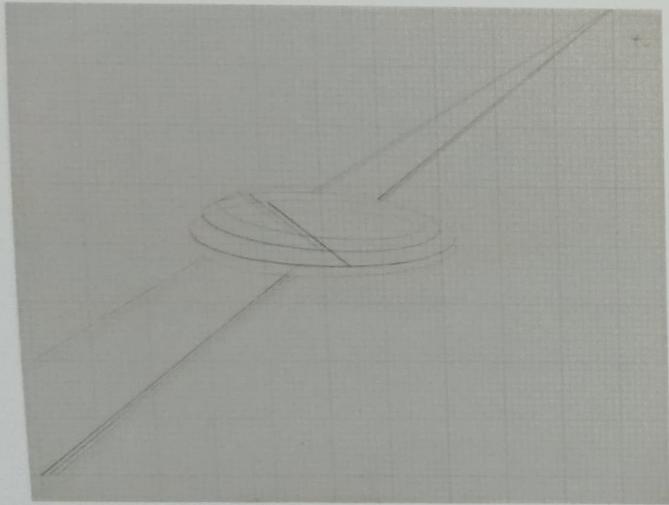
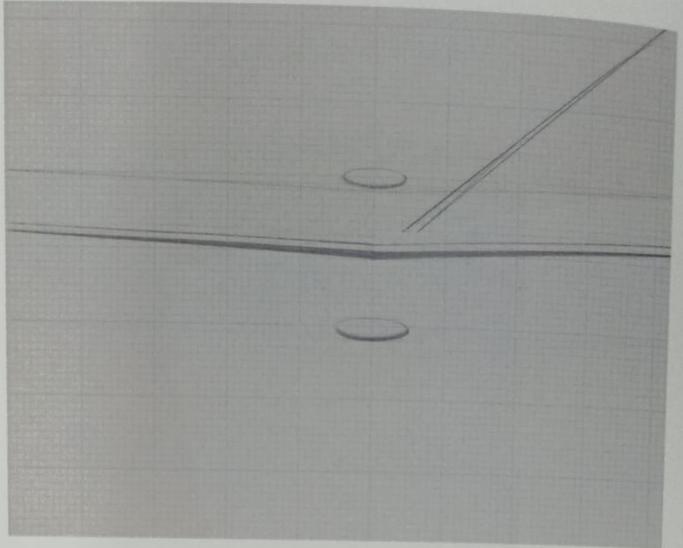
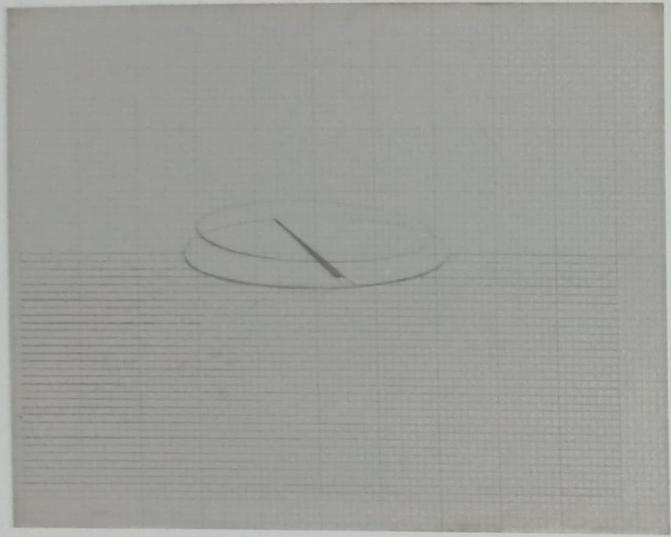
PROCESS - THE QUEST FOR FORM

An insight into Mohamedi's processes is gathered through sketches, photographs, and ephemera found in her studio. Diagrams on graph paper seem to extract the geometries found in nature. Grids and letter transfers of the English and Arabic alphabet reveal references in calligraphic contours. The framing of Mohamedi's photographs present a close view which strips the image of the specifics of place. Smaller process photos reveal a frame within a frame, a small rectangle drawn with pen on the photographs, to zoom in to the interplay between solid and air, light and dark. The push and pull of different forces plays out in Mohamedi's line works as well, with interwoven horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines, that make each work non-static and imbued with dynamic movement. The small size photos seem to be shot in and around Baroda (Vadodara) and rural Gujarat. Pages from a filofax that were recovered from Mohamedi's studio have drawings by Mohamedi and fellow artist Jeram Patel. The playful doodles read as a conversation through visuals between the two artists. On one of the pages, Mohamedi writes '*Introduction of (the) function of a frame in aesthetics*' (page 42)

As per anecdotes from her friends and family, Mohamedi preferred to take photographs during the times of day when contrasts of dark and light were the sharpest. She was known to step out with her camera in the blazing afternoon sun which bleached the landscape and marked it in places through stark shadows.

Mohamedi was used to handling sophisticated camera equipment, owed to her father's photography business in Bahrain. She used a Nikon F2, a single lens reflex camera to make her photographs. Mohamedi viewed her own photographs as part of her process, not as artworks in themselves. The photographs are striking as they are not regular travel photos, but evoke how she sought forms. Her photographic work may be counted as one of the early forays in photography by artists in India, at a time when the medium was not fully explored or accepted as a medium in art. There is a courage in the renunciation of colour and in Mohamedi's later works, even form, when all that remains are linear trajectories.

Untitled, mid 1950s – mid 1980s, photograph b/w,
vintage silver gelatin print, 9.25 x 14.25 in
Collection: Dossal Family





Graph works: Untitled, ca. 1980s, graphite on graph papers (series of 23)

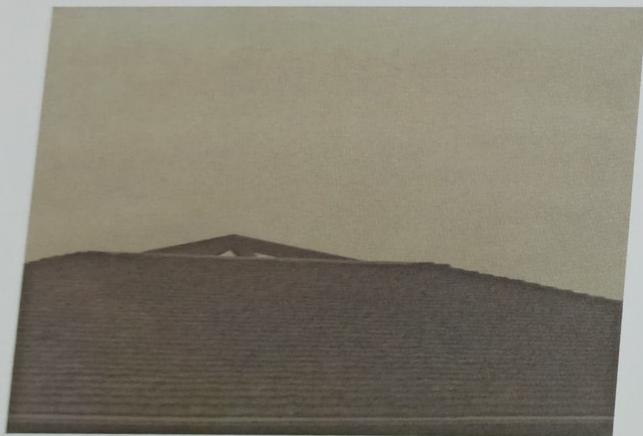
Photographs: Untitled, ca. 1970s, photographs b/w,
vintage silver gelatin prints, 9 x 11 in

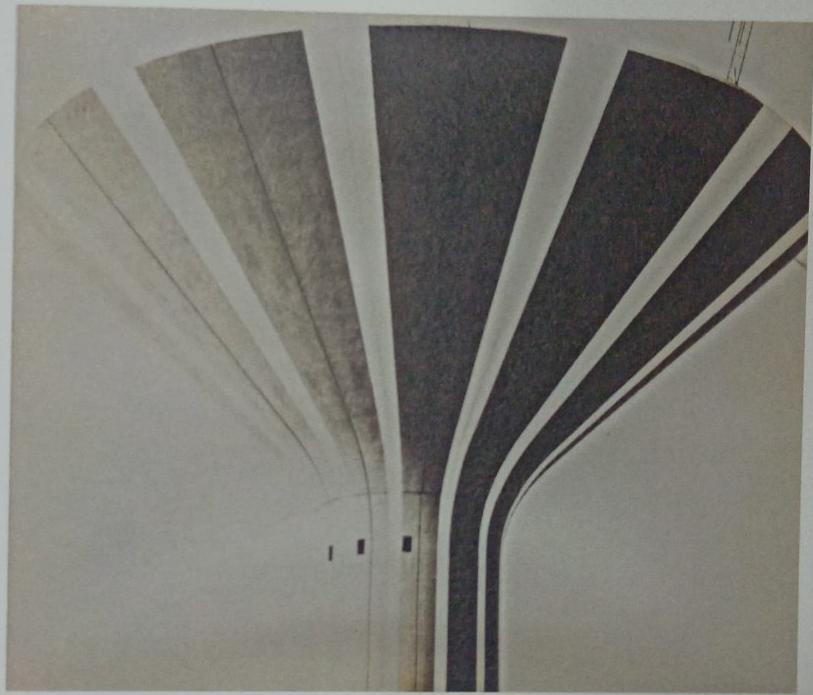
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



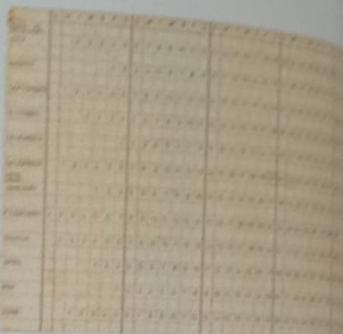
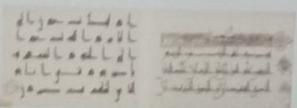
Left & centre: Untitled, ca. 1980s, photographs b/w, vintage silver gelatin prints, 10.5 x 13.5 in
Collection: Dossai Family

Right: Untitled, ca. 1950s – 1980s, photograph b/w, vintage silver gelatin print, 9 x 11 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





Material found in Nasreen Mohamedi's Biwedi studio including her drafting tools, a leather bag designed by her, letter transfers, printed calendar, sketches (most likely by artist Jeram Patel) on Bhupen Khakhar's letterhead, further sketches (possibly by Jeram Patel, Mohamedi or her students), notes on 'Form' by Mohamedi, a cushion cover made by Mohamedi and her friend, Gopi, Bombay



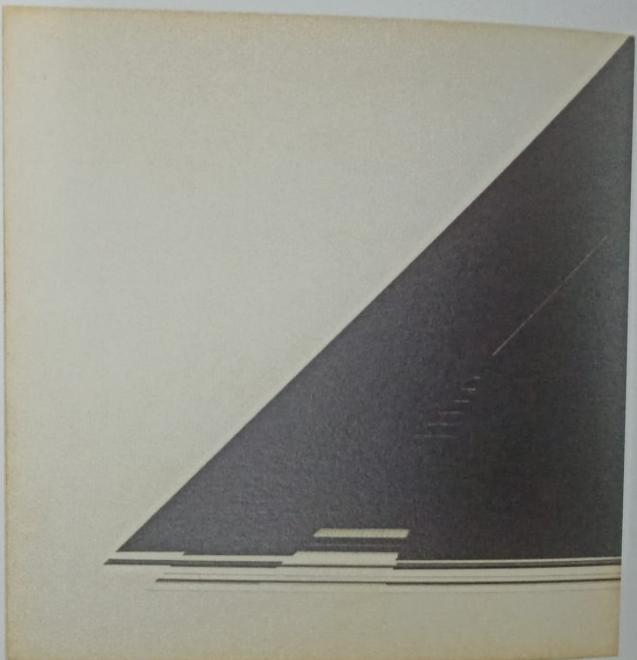
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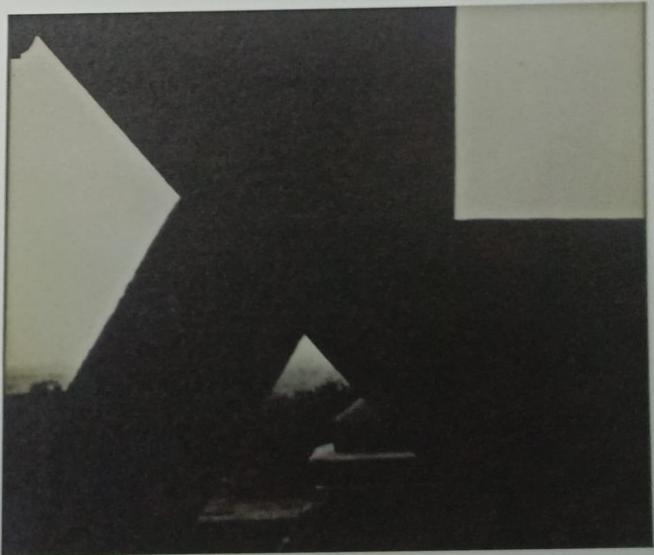
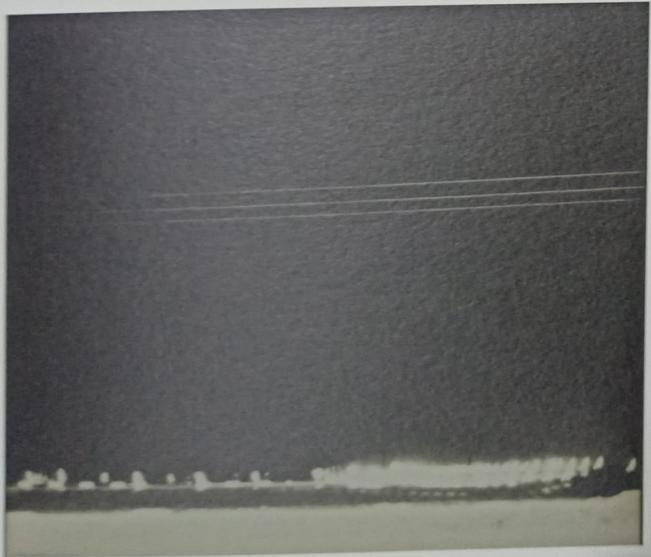


left, ink works, untitled, ca. 1970 - 1980, ink on paper board, 20 x 20 in

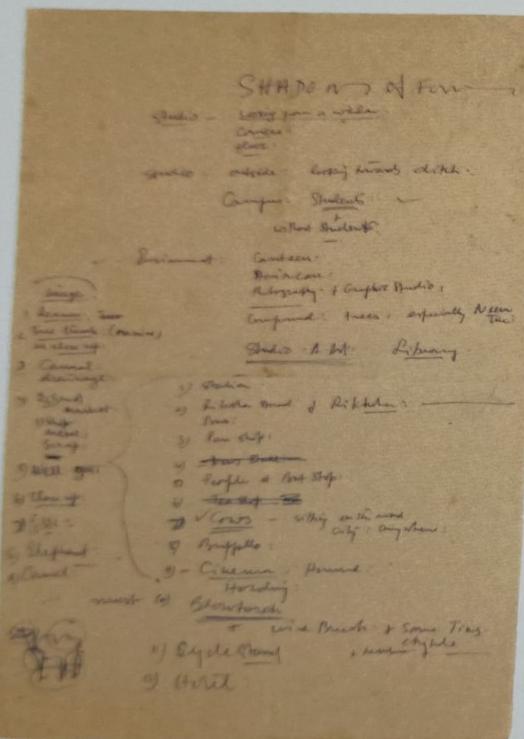
Right, photographs, untitled, mid 1950s - mid 1980s, photograph b/w,
vintage silver gelatin print, 9 x 11.5 in

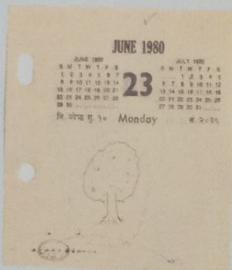
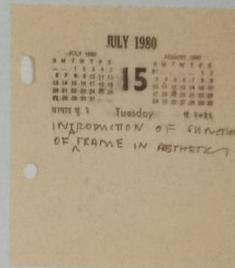
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





Material found at Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio including photographs by Mohamedi & sketches by Jeram Patel and Nasreen Mohamedi on pages of a filofax
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives

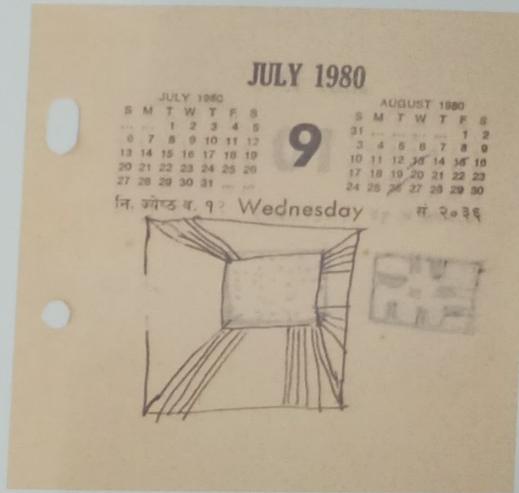
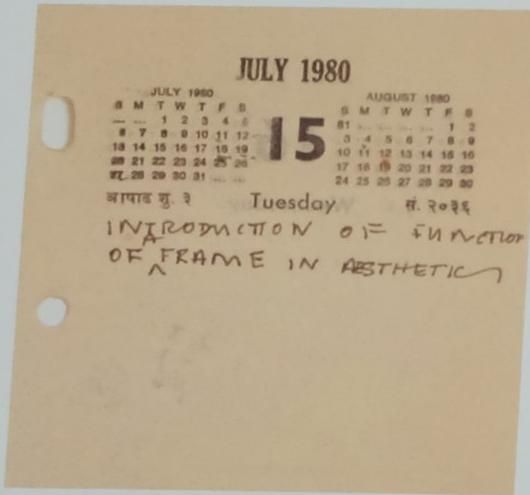


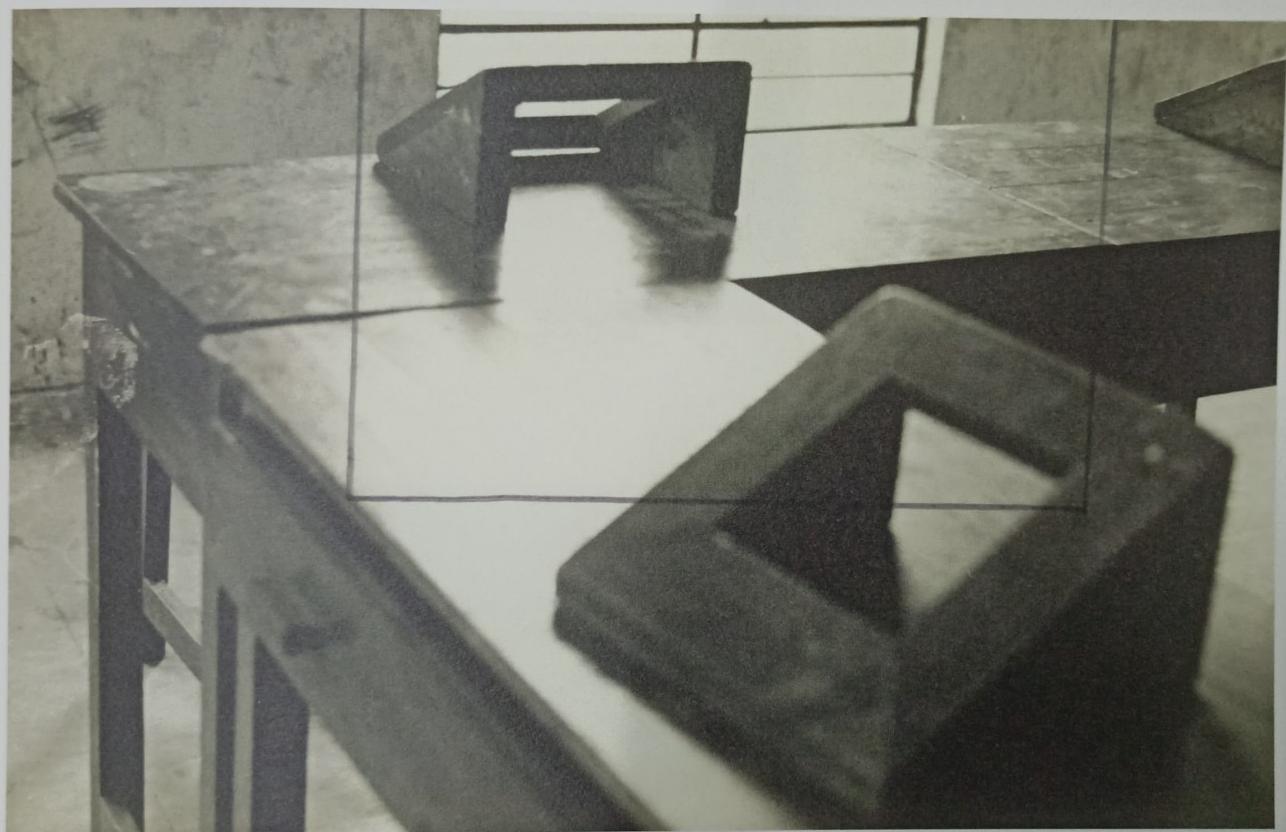


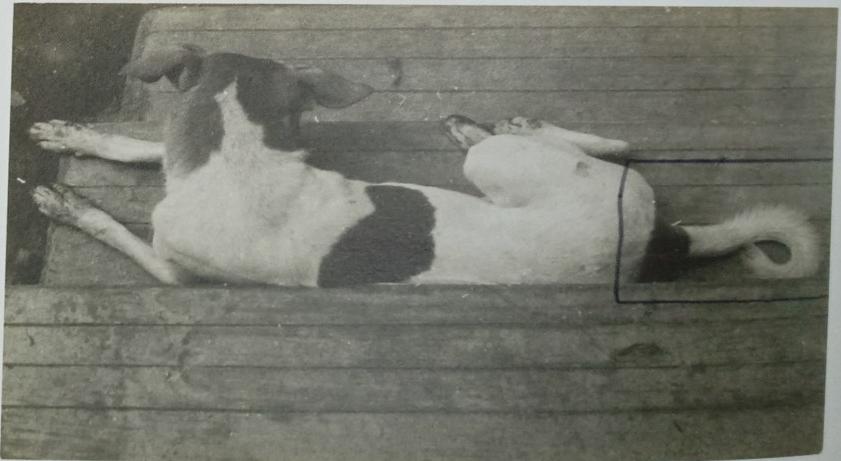
Sketches by Nasreen Mohamedi on pages of a filofax, found in her Baroda studio

Right: Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. 1972 – 1988,
photograph b/w, vintage silver gelatin print and ink, Baroda

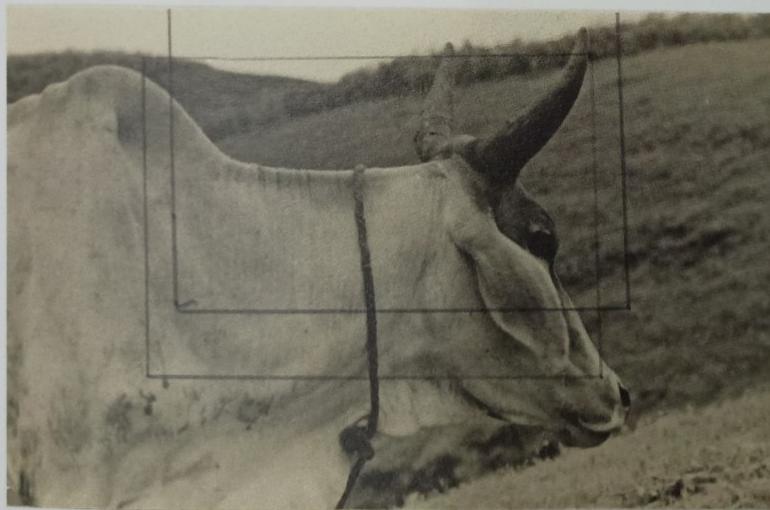
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives







Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. 1972 – 1988, photographs b/w,
vintage silver gelatin prints and ink, Baroda and rural Gujarat
Courtesy Sikander & Hydari family archives



187. Yousouf Mohamed, 1988, ca. 1985, writing, 11 x 15 in.
Collection: Mohamed and Hamed

188. Zheng Wu, 1988, 1988, painting, 11 x 15 in., paper, 13 5/8 x 18 1/2 in.
Collection: Cheyan Blue Family, Courtesy: BEI Museum



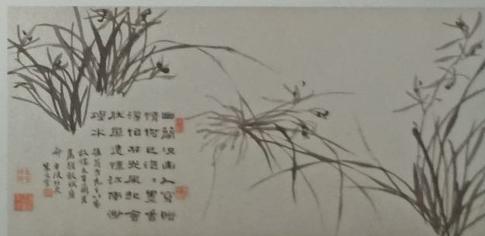
THE MAXIMUM OUT OF THE MINIMUM

While comparisons can be drawn between Mohamedi and western and Indian abstraction of the modern period, Mohamedi's initial works have the flourish of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, caricature and nature studies in brush and ink (sumi-e painting). Roughly estimated to date from the 1950s- early 1960s, works by Mohamedi of this kind are telling of her persistent vision seen in the later geometric line works, extracting the essence of form inscribed within an airy, floating background. The two unique portrait drawings in pen (page 51) show minimal use of delineation to represent the whole form, a propensity that is sustained through the works from different periods - '*The maximum out of the minimum*'¹

The horizontality in Mohamedi's work is significant. We see a horizontal structuring in the orientation of Mohamedi's compositions. The horizon represents a limit (of vision) - a locale that is never reached but is endlessly shifting, presenting the mystery of unending space and abundance - as seen in the unobstructed landscapes of the sea and desert.

With a family recreation home on Kihim beach, Alibagh, or in the deserts of the Persian gulf of Kuwait and Bahrain, Mohamedi's contemplative practice was shaped by these two extreme landscapes.

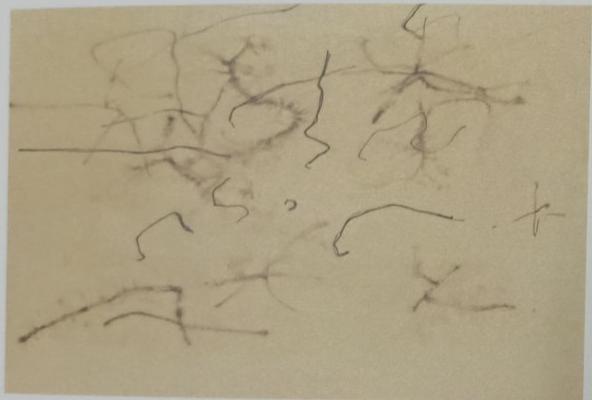
Mohamedi's works indicate her laborious process. Through her later line works, one can imagine Mohamedi sitting on her low drafting table and drawing, carefully and precisely orchestrated in terms of the pressure of the pen or pencil on paper, over and over, predetermining the length of each line to form a connected whole. '*Each line, texture (form) are born of effort, history and pain.*'²



¹ Nasreen Mohamedi, diary entry, February 1, 1974,
Nasreen in Retrospect, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, 1995

² Ibid, July 20, 1971, Delhi





Left, centre and right:
Untitled, ca. 1960-1970, ink on paper, 7 x 9.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



1

Left to right:

Untitled, ca. early 1960s, ink and watercolour on paper, 6.75 x 10.85 in

Collection: Dossal Family

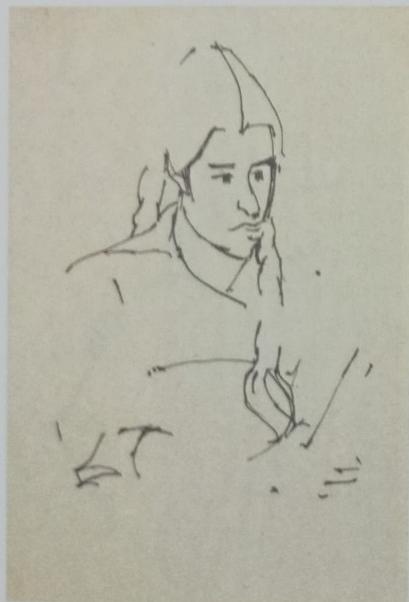
Untitled (portrait), ca. late 1950s, ink on paper, 7.9 X 5.7 in

Collection: Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation

Untitled (Mr. Ashraf Mohamedi, Mr. Sikander Futehally),

ca. late 1950s, ink on paper, 7.5 x 11.5 in

Collection: Sikander and Hydari



Left: Untitled, ca. early 1960s, ink and wash on paper, 14 x 10.75 in
Collection: Dossal Family

Right: Untitled, mid 1960s, lithograph, 22 x 14.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





Untitled, circa 1960s, ink and collage on paper, 7 x 9 in
Private Collection



EKING A LANGUAGE: TO FACE A WHITE WALL

*'Where do I stand in relation to space and thought.
The layers in Indian sculpture, in Arabic calligraphy
In Waves - in connection with my work.'*

As one walks through the CSMVS Museum - encountering visuals of abundance, from the many limbed sculptures of deities and the vibrant narratives of miniature painting - to the Mohamedi exhibit, we see how Mohamedi's works present a rupture from the history of colourful, figurative art in India. One may instead draw parallels with the labour, precision and geometry of textile weaves, design in Islamic architecture and the rhythms in music. Mohamedi would listen to Hindustani classical music while working. Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal and Amir Khan were among her favourites. Mohamedi's exposure to European and American post-war abstraction through her studies in London at the Saint Martin's School of Art and later in Paris (1961-63) for a scholarship to study at Monsier Guillard's atelier, were also of significance.

Paris, which had been a global centre for art, attracted many artists from the subcontinent. S. H. Raza, Krishna Reddy and Sadequin also had their studios in Paris at the time, and one can trace the impact the prevailing European abstraction had on their oeuvres. In Mohamedi's collages and canvases, one sees a changing vision that is akin to the overlaying of forms seen in Tachisme, a style of French abstract painting popular in the 1940s and 1950s. She was drawn to the works by Henri Michaux, Eva Hesse and Agnes Martin and the lyrical abstraction of Georges Mathieu. In Mohamedi's collages, we see a juxtaposition of monochromatic shapes as experienced in the metaphysical works of Russian avant-garde artist, Kasimir Malevich.²

Mohamedi found an inimitable voice in her works through a study of varied trajectories, including Western abstractionists such as Lazlo Maholy Nagy and Kandinsky. *'Again I am reassured by Kandinsky - the need to take from an outer environment and bring it an inner necessity. I stress on the inner... The world is raging a war from the outside and mine is an inner one. Both valid and necessary.'*³

¹ Nasreen Mohamedi, diary entry, July 4, 1967,
Nasreen in Retrospect, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, 1995

² Geeta Kapur, 'Elegy for an unclaimed beloved',

Ibid & Times of India article (pg 134 in catalogue)

³ Nasreen Mohamedi, diary entry, September 30, 1970,
Nasreen in Retrospect, Ashraf Mohamedi Trust, 1995

Left: Untitled, circa 1960s, collage on board, 9.25 x 13.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

Right: Untitled, ca. early 1960s, ink and watercolour on paper, 15.25 x 24.5 in
Collection: Dossal Family











Left to right:

Untitled, ca. 1960s oil on canvas, 26 x 71 in
Private Collection

Untitled, ca. 1960s, watercolour on paper, 6.25 x 13 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

Untitled, ca. 1960s, watercolour on paper, 9 x 9 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



Left: Untitled, ca. mid 1960s, oil on canvas, 40 x 66.5 in
Collection: Dossal Family

Right: Untitled (Karachi), 1969, collage and watercolour on paper, 15.75 x 22 in
Collection: Priyam & Gayatri Jhaveri







ABSTRACTION IN BOMBAY

At age seventeen, encouraged by her family, Mohamedi secured admission to the Saint Martin's School of Art in London. After receiving a diploma in design from the school (1954-1957), she spent time in Bahrain where her father had a flourishing business, Ashraf's, which traded in Japanese photography equipment. Mohamedi's interest in photography, and her photographs of the arid desert could be attributed to her time in Bahrain and Kuwait.

Mohamedi embraced photography early in her career and several of her photographs show her framing of stark forms in architecture and landscape. She returned to Bombay (Mumbai) in 1958. At the time, there were few avenues for artists, and no commercial galleries existed in the city. This was a period of a burgeoning art scene in the country. In a newly independent nation, art explorations in separate regions evoked the multiple ideas of modernity in India. Here, we revisit the art spaces in Mumbai which aided Mohamedi's art experimentations, especially two

important centres that she was a part of, the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute and the Vision Exchange Workshop (VIEW).

Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute

Mohamedi visited the Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute, where she was offered a studio to work. The Institute was one of the first informal, multidisciplinary cultural hubs in the country. It was set-up in a seafront bungalow in Breach Candy, Mumbai. The city's artists, playwrights, musicians, dancers, poets and filmmakers congregated at the Institute and many had makeshift studios there. A distinguished list of cultural practitioners was associated with the Institute, making it an exciting platform for an exchange of ideas between the visual and performing arts. Ebrahim Alkazi had his Theatre Unit School of Drama and Sitar player Ravi Shankar set up the Kinnara School of music there. Singer Kishori Amonkar, filmmaker Shyam Benegal, historian Gerson DeCunha and several others were regulars. Through the Institute,

Nasreen Mohamedi at Bhulabhai Desai Institute, Bombay, ca. 1959-1961,
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives

Mohamedi met members of the Progressive Artists Group, including MF Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Krishen Khanna and Bal Chhabda.

Other than the Jehangir Art Gallery, Gallery 59 was the first art gallery in Mumbai. It was set up by Bal Chhabda in 1959 at the Institute. Mohamedi showed her works for the first time in 1961 at the Gallery 59. In 1963, Mohamedi had another show of her works at the newly opened exhibition space by Kekoo Gandhy, gallery Chemould.

At the Bhulabhai Desai Institute, V.S. Gaitonde was an inspiration for Mohamedi. Parallels and departures may be drawn between the two artists' works, especially with Mohamedi's canvas works. While Gaitonde developed a textured opaque surface, the tonalities of Mohamedi's works are subtler, creating translucent washes with oil paint. Gaitonde was a reticent yet formidable figure, who influenced several artists in the way he leant philosophical meaning to non-representational art. After studying at the JJ School of Art, Gaitonde developed an aesthetic that deviated from

M.F. Husain photographed by Nasreen Mohamedi. Rajasthani Mohamedi accompanied Husain on trips to Rajasthan while he shot his film 'Through The Eyes of a Painter'. Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archive

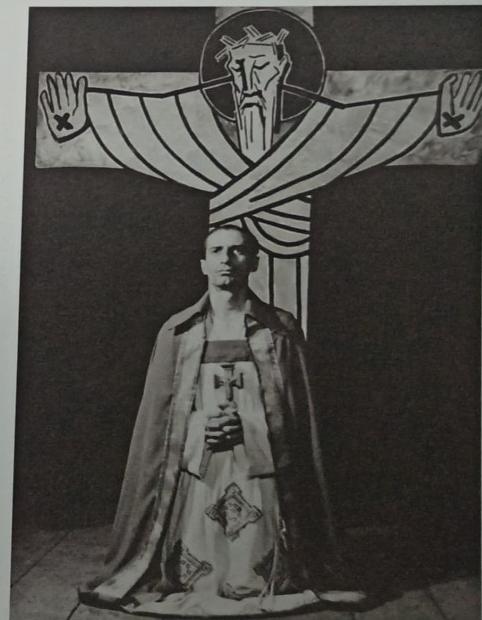
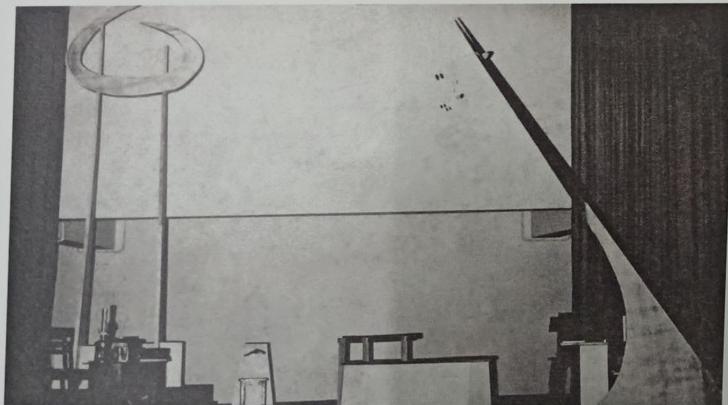


Left: Stage set of Augustus Strindberg's *The Father*, designed and directed by E. Alkazi with a mobile by Alexander Calder suspended from the curved wooden arch on the top right, Theatre Unit, Bombay, 1956.

Courtesy: Alkazi Theatre Archives

Right: Theatre set designed by M.F. Husain for Ebrahim Alkazi's 'Murder in the Cathedral', Theatre Group, Bombay, 1953.

Courtesy: Alkazi Theatre Archives



academic realism and figuration. Zen philosophy and Paul Klee were important influences for Gaitonde, which in turn were to have an impact on Mohamedi's practice.

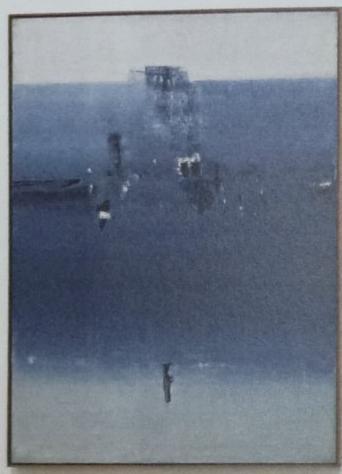
Mohamedi went on to develop a unique sensibility with a completely monochromatic palette and geometrically structured picture plane.

The interest in abstraction and minimalism that sprouted in the city may be traced through the works of some of the artists and the collaborative projects. Featured in the exhibition are works by Gaitonde, Dashrath Patel, Pilloo Pochkhanawala, Jeram Patel, Nalini Malani and photos of Alkazi's theatre set designs created in collaboration with artists at the Institute. Comparisons between Pochkhanawala and Mohamedi bring up interesting similarities. One of the first Indian women sculptors to experiment with scrap metal, Pochkhanawala's work went against the grain of conventional associations with women artists' practices. Pochkhanawala also focused on the abstract and the linear in her works. Many of her free-hand drawings would translate into sculptures.

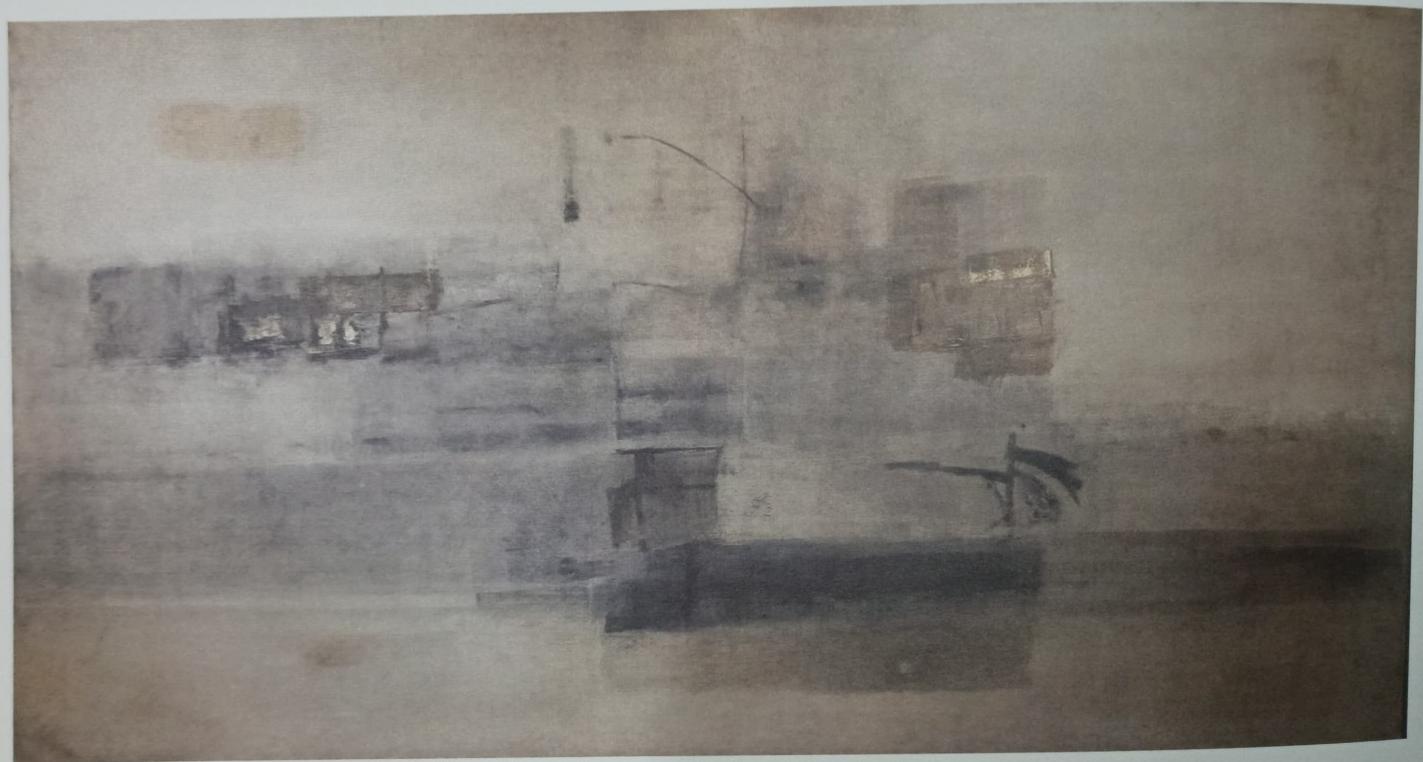
The sustained beginnings of the use of technological media in Indian art maybe viewed through the photographic work by Mohamedi, Dashrath Patel and Nalini Malani. Patel had a studio at the Bhulabhai Institute between 1957-1959, partly overlapping with Mohamedi's time there. Patel's shot of dyed sarees drying on the banks of the Sabarmati river, is abstracted through the aerial view, blurring the lines between painterly and photographic composition. Jyoti Bhatt's photos in the exhibition are of a documentary nature, and form an enlightening archive of the time.

Installation view

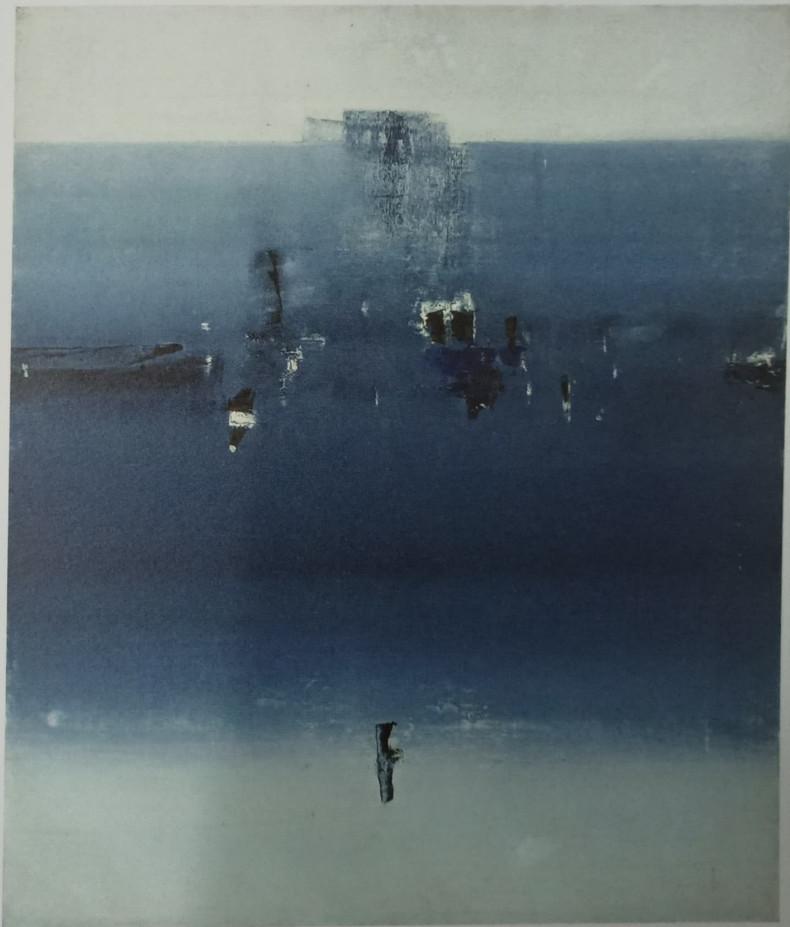
Background: V S Gaitonde, untitled, 1966, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in, collection: Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation
Foreground: Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. late 1950s – 1960s, oil on canvas, 38 x 30.5 in, collection: Sikander and Hydari



Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. late 1950s – 1960s, oil on canvas, 36 x 60 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydar



V. S. Gaitonde, untitled. 1966, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in
Collection: Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation



Left: Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. mid 1960s, ink and watercolour on paper, 9.25 x 13.25 in

Right: Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. 1960s, felt-tip pen on paper, 9.25 x 13.25 in

Collection: Sikander and Hydari



Piloo Pochkhanawala, untitled, ca. 1970s, ink on paper, 11 x 15.2 in.
Collection: Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation



Dashrath Patel, Sabarmati River, 1961, photograph, 26 x 22 in
Collection: Piramal Patel



Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. 1960s – 1980s, photograph b/w, vintage silver gelatin print, 9 x 11.5 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





Top: S.H. Raza and Nasreen Mohamedi,
ca. 1961-63, Paris
Courtesy: Raza Foundation



Bottom: Nasreen Mohamedi and Krishen Khanna
at Bhupen Khakhar's residence, 1970, Baroda
Courtesy: Jyoti Bhatt and Asia Art Archive

Debut Of A New Woman Painter

EXHIBITION AT GALLERY 59

By Our Art Critic

One of the pleasurable rewards for an art critic is being confronted with good paintings at the first exhibition of a new artist. Such a reward was amply provided by Nasreen Mohamedi, who made her debut with a modest exhibition of a dozen oil paintings at Gallery 59.

Bal Chhabda, that exclusive and discriminating art-sponsor, did a wise thing in assembling this exhibition of the charming and young painter. A student of St. Martin's Art School in London Nasreen Mohamedi is due to leave for an extensive stay in Paris. And, the present exhibition is a token show of the work done by her and a preview of her future development.

The exhibition consists of big and small canvases, done meticulously with smooth brush-strokes. The subjects are the routine ones: trees, weeds, leaves, twigs, sail in the dark sea, night and so on. But in rendering them in half-Abstract, half-Impressionist style, peculiarly her own, Nasreen Mohamedi has revealed talents. Not every one can get the maximum out of blues as she has done in "Sails", which is easily the best in the show. Her "Night" can be taken as a depiction of "the rhapsody on a windy night" through black, blue, and red. "Island" is another memorable painting, for it provides an aerial view of an island lost in sea-green splendour.

Not all the paintings are successful ventures. Whenever she has tried to instil imagined forms through heavy brushwork and dark splashes, the serenity of her paintings gets disturbed, as for instance in "Trees" and "Leaves."

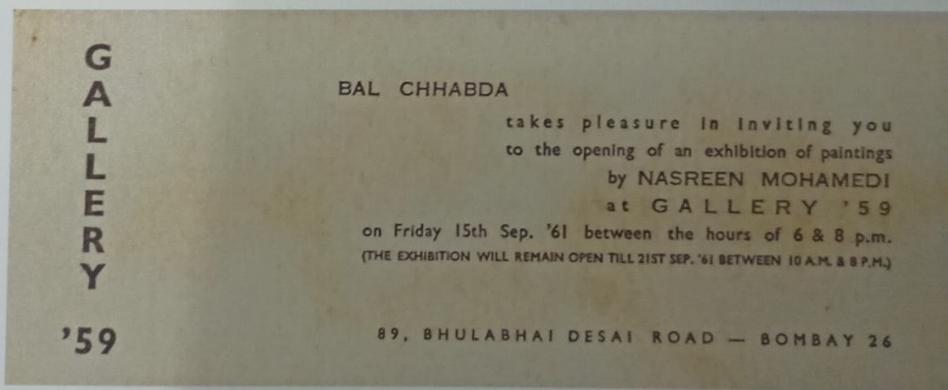
This exhibition, which is on till September 21, deserves a visit. It is better to make an acquaintance with her work now and await her future development as an artist.

Left: Press clipping found at Nasreen Mohamedi's studio

Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives

Right: Invite for Mohamedi's first exhibition, Gallery '59, 1961, Mumbai

Courtesy: Aliasgar Mithaiwala





The Vision Exchange Workshop

The Vision Exchange Workshop (VIEW) was an artist-led initiative by Akbar Padamsee at his Napeansea road apartment between 1969-1971. With a similar spirit of collaboration as the Bhulabhai Desai Centre, VIEW invited artists, students, filmmakers, photographers, scientists and animators to make experimental work. Some of the most fascinating permeations between artists' practices and techniques took place at the workshop.

Among the artists at VIEW were Nasreen Mohamedi and Nalini Malani. Malani recounts how Mohamedi, who was proficient in photography processes, aided her in producing some of her photogram works and introducing her to the technique of 'dodging' at the darkroom set up by Padamsee at VIEW. Photograms are photos made without a camera through exposures of actual objects on film during the developing process. Photographs of structural models, film, photograms and stencils were found from Mohamedi's studio. Mohamedi experimented

with controlling exposures in the dark room and worked with gelatin sheet cutouts of varying transparencies, achieving geometric visions of depth and form.

The photogram by Malani in this exhibition was created during the VIEW workshop. We see certain visual affinities of pattern and design between Mohamedi's and Malani's works featured here, though the way the artists thought about photography and art differed. In her references of architecture, Mohamedi abstracted forms through a tight framing of the composition, synthesising a sense of the timeless. For Malani, architectural references drew from the situations of the time, as a comment on the process of modernisation, rapid urbanisation and notions of the ideal city.

Installation view

Vitrine: Photograms, photo collage, photographs, stencils and film found in Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Wall: Nalini Malani, Untitled III, 1970, photogram, 38 x 31.25 in

Left: Nalini Malani, Untitled I, 1970, photogram, 38 x 31 in

Right: Nalini Malani, Untitled II, 1970, photogram, 38 x 29 in
Courtesy: Nalini Malani

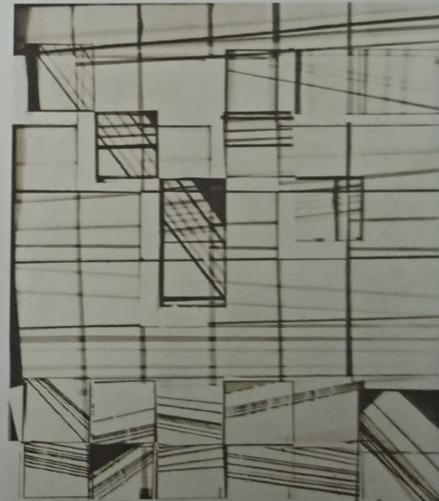


EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION WITH NALINI MALANI

A conversation I had with Nalini Malani revealed significant aspects about Mohamedi and her practice: How proficient Mohamedi was with photographic processes, the meticulous way in which she thought about exhibition display, the easy charm with which she mingled with everyone around her, as well as Mohamedi's reflective and self-critical attitude towards her work - her clear position in situating her work and refusal to be seen through a feminist or gendered lens. - Puja Vaish

Nalini Malani:

On Photography : The Vision Exchange Workshop was the most intense period when Nasreen and I worked together. After the summer of 1969 when I made my first series of camera-less photograms in the darkroom, one day Nasreen visited VIEW and I showed her my work. With the facility of the darkroom, Nasreen and I worked together to develop a number of prints from her negatives. It was there that I noticed she would use very



Nalini Malani, *Precincts*, 1969, photogram, 38 x 31.5 in
(This was the first photogram made by Malani at VIEW)
Courtesy: Nalini Malani

thin slivers of cane sticks, attached to different types of shapes, a kind of a plastic-y material. It was a Japanese method to 'dodge' light in making photographs, which she used for example in the set of photographs of Fatehpur Sikri. Additionally Nasreen watched me making my second series of photographs, where I used my technique of different transparent, translucent, opaque and torn papers. As we became friends and she was now familiar with my work, we together made the selection for my solo exhibition at Pundole Art Gallery in 1970.

Nasreen used to have multiple cameras, which were easily accessible for her because her family dealt in cameras in Bahrain. When I asked Nasreen to teach me the technical details of a single lens reflex camera, with F- Stop and shutter speed, she said "Don't ask me, now it's part of my body only!"

Exhibition Installation: Nasreen asked me to help her to set up her solo exhibition at the Jehangir Art Gallery in the 70's. This is when she taught me what *installation* is, and this was a real eye opener for me. She had hired the long hall, the first section, from which we measured everything

out in detail. These measurements she related exactly to the square art works she was making at the time, after which we painted the gallery. The essence in the installing of the works was the placement in space so as to understand and plan the trajectory of the eye of the viewer.

A Purist: Nasreen was very meticulous. She was a purist in many ways. If she wore a cotton saree at 8:30 in the morning till 8:30 at night all the pleats were exactly the same! Similarly her straight hair was always in place. She was very particular about, adamant, to the point where we would say "Oh Nasreen". So a person who was such an aesthete about her appearance, you can imagine what happened later when she suffered Huntington's Chorea. It was an acute agony for her.

Teaching: When I followed Nasreen around in Kamati Baug (in Baroda), where she used to do a lot of classes in the park, I noticed that she, like really good music teachers, actually brought out what was genuine within a student. She almost forbade her students from doing anything that was like her work.

Minimalism: Nasreen's art changed when she moved to Delhi. Not anymore the Tachisme style of oil painting she was doing in Paris, she started to do very minimal works. In this we see the influence of Zen and Islamic architecture and also in the photographs she took at Bahrain and Kuwait of the water tanks and pedestrian crossing. These photographs, especially the ones in which she works with the shadows were so interesting that I suggested she might exhibit them, on which she replied: "What amateur stuff!"

Diary: Her whole way of life and her diary also constantly questions herself. The way she dug into her own psyche....

Animation: At the time I watched Nasreen working on a new fascinating drawing series, based on curved spaces, I proposed to make this into a black and white film animation. Technically similar to my own stop animation Dream Houses of 1969. She refused, as she felt all the lusciousness of the texture of the paper, the way the colours, the greys, the shades of grey she made with ink, not pencil, all that would be lost on film.

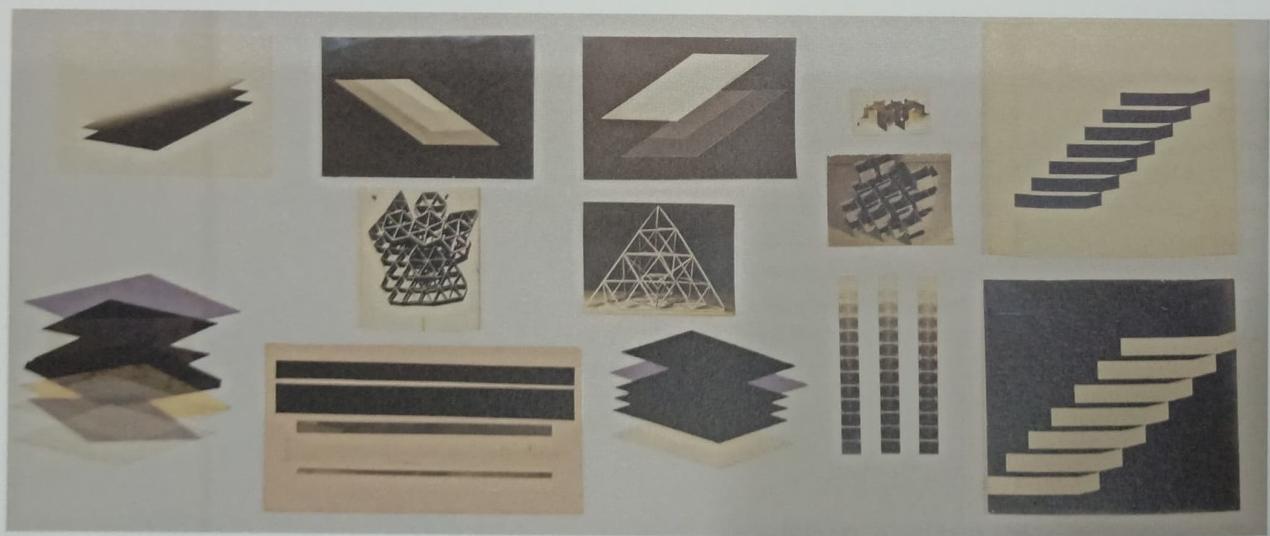
Female artist: When I started to organise an all female artist exhibition in 1979, after returning from New York where I visited the AIR¹ gallery, one of the first artists whom I invited was Nasreen. This invitation she turned down and she said "I'm not a female artist, I don't want to be categorized, vernacularized as a female".

Recognition: Nasreen was an amazing phenomenon but unfortunately her art was only recognized in India and internationally decades after she's gone.

- Selected quotes by Nalini Malani from a conversation between Nalini Malani and Puja Vaish, January 2023.

¹A.I.R. Gallery is an artist-run non-profit arts organization and exhibition space founded in 1972. A.I.R. supports the open exchange of ideas and risk-taking by women and non-binary artists in order to provide support and visibility. Malani organised a historic travelling exhibition of four women artists: Arpita Singh, Madhvi Parekh, Nilima Sheikh and Malani titled, 'Through the Looking Glass' in 1987-1989

Photograms, photo collage, photographs, stencils and film found in Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives



Nalini Malani, Untitled III, 1970, photogram, 38 x 31.25 in
Courtesy: Nalini Malani



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Installation view

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BARODA - PEDAGOGY & LEGACY

One may view Nasreen Mohamedi as a bridge between the stylistically diverse art centres of Bombay and Baroda. Mohamedi was employed as a teacher for drawing at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda from 1972, and chose to continue living in Baroda till the last few years of her life. The period when Mohamedi was teaching in Baroda is known to be the phase when there was a marked shift in her works (ref: Geeta Kapur, Times of India article, 1987, page 134). It was in Baroda that Mohamedi produced her widely recognised line works.

Mohamedi became an integral part of the Baroda art fraternity and the art school. Her close friendships with artists Jeram Patel, Gulammohamed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt, PD Dumal, Jaidev Thakore among others, as well as with her students are conveyed through the photographs and letters.

In Baroda, Mohamedi's legacy lives on. With the coveted Nasreen Mohamedi Scholarship instituted by her family in her name, awarded each year to a Masters and a Bachelors degree student, students of the college are familiar with Mohamedi. More importantly, her aesthetics and teaching have had a lasting impact on a generation of students, some of whom went on to teach at the college.

This presents an opportunity to study the diverse aesthetics that coalesce in Baroda through the practices of Mohamedi and Jeram Patel among others, as well as the many artists who have taken residence there.

Nasreen Mohamedi, Jaidev Thakore, Gulammohammed Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh, c.1978, Fine Arts Fair, Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU Baroda
Courtesy: Gulammohammed Sheikh and Asia Art Archive

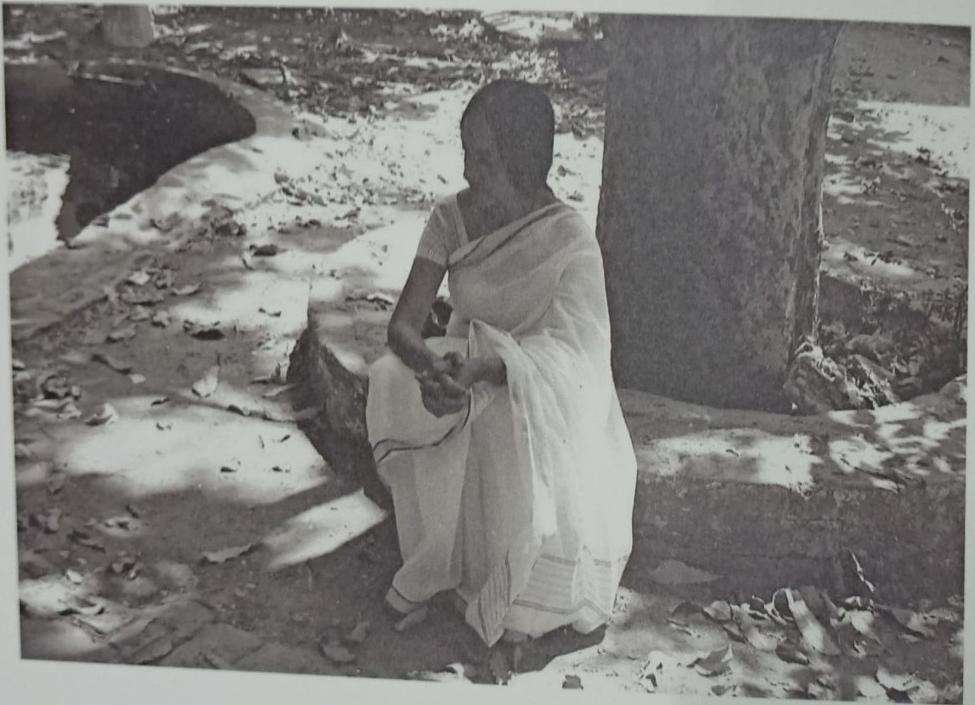
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Jeram Patel, untitled, 1960, Chinese ink on paper, 13.3 x 16.7 in
Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi



Nasreen Mohamedi, untitled, ca. early 1960s, ink and wash on paper, 9.25 x 9.25 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari





A SENSIBILITY, DELICATE AS A DEWDROP
GULAMMOHAMMED SHEIKH

Translated from Gujarati by Hemang Ashwinkumar, commissioned by the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation

People of Vadodara are unaware of the quiet departure of a unique personality who had lived in their midst for about two decades. An artist non-pareil, Nasreen Mohamedi breathed her last at mid noon on the 14th of May 1990 on Kihim beach near Mumbai. Two years ago, Babu Chhadava, a maverick architect and the driving force behind the Darshan Film Society that brought world cinema to the craving city audiences for around a decade, had made a similar departure, solitary and secret. When Suresh Joshi, the literary maestro entrenched in his meditative quest sitting by his favourite window, passed away, people had fleetingly lifted their heads to look up; however, the city has failed to memorialize the scholar's illustrious heritage.¹

By nature, Nasreen was averse to the idea of self-proclamation of any kind, let alone overt

showing-off. Her exhibition invites were left almost entirely blank and an exhibition catalogue would be a rarity; even when she chose to print one, the pages would only have sparse lines and dots or ant-like columns of alphabets in smallest possible types, such that it would be hard to even trace her name. Probably, she had designed her life with minimum speech and action. A simple attire, mostly a white saree, at times grey or black with a thin border, with no jewelry to speak of, except for a worn-out, silver anklet or an old amulet. The houses she lived in were thoroughly painted in white, not just walls but even windows, grills on verandahs, doors, switch boards, fans too. All of these places were sparsely furnished, no fancy goods as a rule. In the early years, she slept on the floormat; later, she got a cot and a low stool to sit on. No furniture at all; however, once when her old father came to see her, she had

Nasreen Mohamedi at Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU Baroda,
photographed by Gulammohammed Sheikh
Courtesy: Gulammohammed Sheikh and Asia Art Archive

¹Several years after this was written, the road on which he stayed has been named "Suresh Joshi Road"

deigned to get a couple of chairs, that too after a great deal of cajoling. White curtains on the windows sported ashen lines and on bedsheets black and white triangles. Empty, totally blank walls resembled the whiteness of sclera and the flooring in Kota stones shone like marble, thanks to her insistence on keeping everything clean. Visitors shuddered to touch the spotless walls for the fear of smearing them, let alone resting their heads against them. Only the uncouth could dare to step inside her house with shoes on. Drawings too, were sans blemish as though scrubbed clean, which she showed by laying them out on the floor and never on the walls: you had to sit and lean over the works to see. Maintaining such persistence for cleanliness must have been an arduous task, but with Shaku and Lallu, a couple she had for domestic help, she could accomplish it. Lallu was an alcoholic with other vices, but Nasreen weaned him off by engaging him in cleaning chores; let's say, she cleansed the soiled soul. It came naturally to her - bringing out the brightness in people. She maintained an affectionate, loving relationship with everyone, be it office clerks, peons in college and sweepers.



Even the wicked got her unconditional love and many would become emotionally attached to her. Who doesn't bargain with the rickshaw drivers over fares? Often as if in atonement for others' sins, she would pour affection toward rickshaw drivers, by touching upon a secret nerve and ultimately winning their hearts. Quite often, rickshaw drivers would insist on chauffeuring her to her destination and even if she made them wait for hours, they would hang on patiently without a grumble, let alone deserting her. In any case, it was impossible to

pick a quarrel with her. Even when the jealous badmouthed her, branded her simplicity as hypocrisy and scoffed at her abstract drawings, she remained unshaken. When she took her students to relish the beauteous forms of nature - the floral and leafy splendor, her adversaries would cast sexist slurs about women's weakness for flowers and leaves; yet she remained stoically unruffled. Conversely, she would engage them with disarming warmth, even pamper them and, in turn, win them over in such a way that they not only became regulars at her home but, touched by the purity of her world, ended up transforming their own. They may continue their waywardly behavior at home, but at Nasreen's, their conduct would invariably mirror hers. She preferred her visitors to sit at a distance; she too would position herself at the opposite end. Seated thus, the guests would feel the expanse of space, between them. Nasreen liked that kind of space.

In case a visitor turned out to be less talkative she would go crazy about him or her. In fact, in her presence, even the garrulous kept quiet and sat listening to silence. Among sounds,

Nasreen loved vocal music and was deeply drawn to Bhimsen Joshi. She always played his Lalit and Miya ki Todi in the company of the like-minded and often felt emotionally swept by the music. In music (as in painting), as the words ebb, and the note flowed in as a raw, pure form of sound, her inner being must have got exhilarated. At some point of time she had renounced colour, tuning in to the dictum (in Meera's verse) 'I have draped myself in a black blanket' or chosen a path to mold art into life and vice versa. In pursuit of such ideals, she had embarked on the meditative route of Zen aesthetics, subtle sayings of Sufi saints and the monochromatic legacy of Chinese art.

She had begun her practice in art about three decades ago. Having spent her childhood in Vadodara, she grew up mainly in Mumbai, but had also imbibed aspects of the desert culture of Bahrain on account of her family's business there. Educated in Mumbai and later in London, she spent a few years in Delhi, only to embrace Vadodara - the city she made her permanent home in 1971. After that, her paintings and drawings crossed borders, both regional and

Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives

national, and garnered lavish accolades; they were shown in the Triennale India as well as among selected exhibitions in London and Paris. She got the National Award in 1976.

Colors had been excluded from her works from early days. She would let black oil paint flow on white canvas. With a brush or roller, she would create transparent or opaque, meandering strokes, flatten some, even lift the paint off in between with the help of a dried brush or a piece of cloth. At times, she'd draw tiny triangles or squares in that space. Held together as though by a steady stream of notes flowing from a single-stringed instrument or simply like beats of a drum, the drawings were strung singly in monochrome. The forms in those drawings (just like in music) might not relate directly with the images of the phenomenal world, but they resonated tangibly with a living element that animated every substance of nature. Just as shifting forms of shadows lengthen and roll over dust and sand, doors and windows, climb over trees and transform the world of nature, just as a flood of footfalls and sweeping gales of wind morph mundane roads into something

wondrous and just as on a dark night a piece of blank sky, bracketed between two houses, trees or light posts in streets proclaim the preternatural play of nature, Nasreen's works would reveal an unmistakably intense and distinctly personal sensibility. Underneath this uncanny play of senses (*leela*) is a profound quest for the subtle and the exquisite, never an urge for theatric declarations. Forms so shy, they literally flinched from the touch of human gaze. Approaching gently, one had to cajole them into becoming visible. Something like tracing a strand of hair in a shadow or finding a piece of transparent glass in water. At times, they appeared to be nothing more than slight intimations of the subterranean flow of a water stream or a low, soothng wind.

Quite like the forms, her structures too had been simplified: a four-square-feet canvas was her favorite, and, if required, she would put two of the kind together. Later, she abjured the canvas and oil paints altogether and chose to work on paper. Initially, she spread or rubbed black ink on paper to make varied forms; subsequently, she washed the inked paper in water and

K. G. Subramanyan and Nasreen Mohamedi at Kunika- Chemould Art Centre, New Delhi, 1970s
Courtesy: The Alkazi Collection of Art

hung it dripping to draw further forms after it dried. Gradually she gave it all up and began playing with horizontal and vertical lines. Now it was all in straight, continuous lines with black geometric patterns upon a band of stark empty expanse of white paper. Most ingenious was the way in which she organized the space. Eventually, even the black forms got reduced; what remained was lines. Just lines. Initially, the lines were filled with black ink but, as she went on to dilute it with water, they began to soften in with grey translucence. And then they softened further to turn into nearly colour-less imprints. K.G. Subramanyan, the master painter used to say that Nasreen's sensibility is delicate as dew. Ramachandra Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and a well-known philosopher, saw in Nasreen's drawings remnants of the ancient Quranic manuscripts and aspects of Islamic Advaita. Art critic Geeta Kapur too sang praises to her ascetic vision. These works could kindle the interest of both the curious onlooker and a seasoned connoisseur of art. Even the advocates of 'humanitarian' art dropped their critical weaponry in the face of her incredible subtleties.

Few years ago, Nasreen caught a disabling disease, one that had afflicted both her elder brothers and snuffed out their lives one after the other. If an elder suffers from this condition, younger siblings, quite likely, will have it too.



Nasreen was deeply aggrieved when the first brother passed away; she would remember him over and over again and burst into tears. And when the second, dearest brother too fell prey to the disease, she was broken. Before he died, it seemed as if she willed his pain upon herself and had begun to suffer. He too passed away in time, but the disease laid siege to Nasreen's inner self, taking into its vicelike grip her limbs and organs as it progressed. Her motor control eroded substantially over time; her hands and mouth trembled continuously, her ligaments sprained frequently as she walked and the risk of involuntarily biting her tongue while talking was scarily real. Putting a morsel of food into the mouth was nothing short of an ordeal; it often dropped from shaky hands. Saliva kept dripping from her mouth endlessly and body muscles quivered all the time. Shooting pain erupted in her jaws. Her teeth clenched uncontrollably, so while taking pills, cotton pods had to be placed in between them to avert the risk of a nasty bite. However, even in the throes of extreme agony, her inner self soldiered on without despairing. The way medieval saints saw the grace of god in poverty and ruination,

she too took her disease in stride by adapting her routine to its demands and kept working.

As a college teacher, after devoting about four hours every day to whole-hearted teaching, she would retire for siesta at her home or that of a friend, just to be able to do her 'work' (drawing) in the evening with a fresh mind and body. Everyone wondered how this woman, totally immersed in drawing straight lines, would deal with the jinx of trembling hands. But Nasreen worked out an ingenious way to deal with it. She acquired a table - the type engineers use - and drafting instruments for drawing. As though making a pact with her wayward hands to shake for ten or twelve hours a day but to make sure they allowed her to draw straight lines for at least two hours a day. Taking her hands into confidence, she managed to control the disease. But as her condition deteriorated, took long leave from the workplace and tendered her resignation ultimately. She lengthened the time of her rest, but abandoning 'drawing' was out of question, oh no.

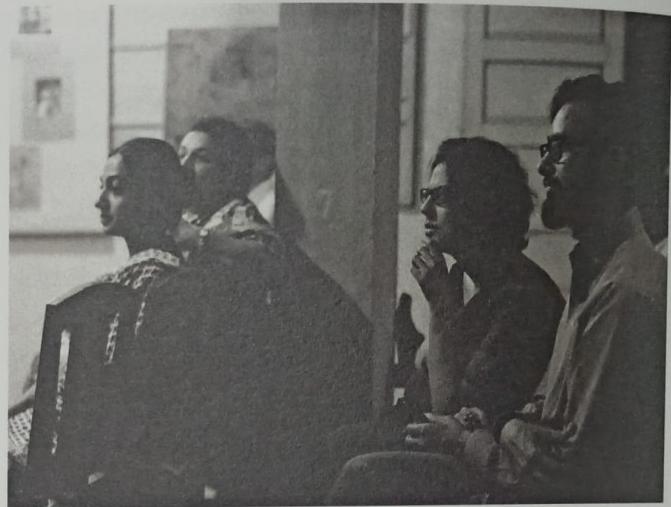
She had maintained cordial relations with everybody at the college. Some had been her great buddies whom she met with abandon. And almost everyone - the good and the not-so-good - were all like her friends. A clutch of bright students, who always hovered around her, had a free run of her house as well; later, they looked after her through her illness. But, customary as it is in institutions, students come and leave; after her resignation, even those she was intimate with gradually disappeared. The pain of estrangement from young souls, she had bonded so warmly with, was too acute for her to endure. Sometimes, on an impulse, she would come to the college and ask if she could teach a class. If she ran into a couple of old students, she would chat for hours on end. Eventually, the lot of friends and students, shrank substantially. With dwindling health, her movement too got more and more restricted. It wasn't possible for everyone to visit her at her home; naturally, caught up in the daily grind of living, they found it difficult to pay her regular visits. Sometimes they did, at others, they forgot her for months together. With the disappearance of familiar faces, Nasreen began

to feel alienated even at the college. Friends felt, she had better move in with her relatives at Mumbai. At least, someone will be there to look after her. How long will she stay here like this? And, God forbid, if something were to happen to her when she's alone!

Nasreen had led a solitary life, true. But it was a life lived on one's own terms and without depending on anyone. Friends and students constituted family for her. And how can one forget Lallu and Shaku who had resolutely stood by her through thick and thin all these years? As she was not ready to leave Vadodara under any circumstances, friends decided to take turns staying with her round the clock, two at a time. In Mumbai, she wouldn't be able to draw, she was scared. How could she turn her back on art which had shown her the way of life? To her, drawing and Vadodara had become synonymous, so she stayed back, ignoring the pleas of well-wishers and embracing the agonizing suffering. In the face of a disease that turned progressively virulent, she kept drawing without losing heart, at least an hour a day initially, then on alternate days, then every

two or four days and so on. Around that time, an exhibition of her works was organized in Delhi. At the insistence of friends and admirers, she agreed to show all her works, old and new. Geeta Kapur's essay covering a comprehensive review of a lifetime of work appeared on the central page of the Time of India. Ramchandra Gandhi wrote: opening the closed up gallery at night by illuminating it with their radiance, angels must be jostling with each other to have a glimpse of Nasreen's work.

Later, her ardent desire to continue drawing increased in direct proportion to the virulence of the disease. She would remain engaged in making a drawing or two somehow and when she couldn't, she heaved deep, heavy sighs. Apparently, she was left with only one way of fighting with the ailment now. Just as the medieval knight staved off Death (appearing in a human form) by engaging him in the game of chess in Bergman's classic 'The Seventh Seal', Nasreen had to keep the disease at bay by inscribing magical lines on white papers. During those brief intervals of creativity, her shriveling body would be charged with unearthly energy;



she would look so perfectly healthy that one wondered if, having reigned in her infirmity, she had finally succeeded in winning the battle against death. Alas! When the disease overpowered her again, she would break down like a child. Once, she got so overwrought that, in a maddening fit to fight off her nemesis, she turned almost hysterical and challenged the disease with something like, "Do what you like. You can control my body, not my mind."

In such a critical condition, she went to Mumbai last month for treatment. Will go to Kihim beach from there and stay at family home, she said. She had always desired to be in the lap of nature; the seashore, the open air and the sparse trees were the things she deeply craved. From there, she made it a point to write letters to everyone she held dear. It would be fair to say, she literally cajoled her wayward hand and unruly letters into finishing those last dispatches. Letters in black ink, looking much like ruled lines on thin paper, unvaryingly carried just one message for those who worried for her: I am fine and want to do a lot of 'work' now. But, call it destiny or her innate, unexpressed desire, the ink flowing from the nib of her pen was about to dry up; now, the drawings dripping out of it were fit only for the eyes of angels. Now on, whenever dew falls, Nasreen's soaring vision will sprinkle its memories in gentle showers.

(First published in Lokasatta
on May 23rd 1990)

On our way back from Ajanta, we had been to watch Saeed Mirza making a documentary on

the murals, it poured relentlessly until Jalgaon. The night train we took from there was wrapped up in humid air. The next morning, as we reached Mumbai, we realized the city too had gone through a spell of off-season showers. Then listening to Nasreen's elder sister Rukayya talking, I reached the place where Nasreen had breathed her last: a verdant village facing the seashore lined with neat rows of Mohamedi and Latifi family houses and liberally dotted with towering, old palm and coconut, sprawling banyan and mango trees, amidst an assortment of wild shrubs. I imagined the ornithologist Salim Ali who belonged to this family merging into this lush natural world like a little bird during his writing sojourns in this place. Freshening up, we drove towards Nasreen's grave. Their gardener, Vishnu, accompanied us with a basket of flowers. Rukayya later told me, his father served the local temple as a priest; seeing the vertical vermilion mark between his eyebrows, I had guessed as much. Vishnu had dug up the ground for Nasreen's grave; so overawed were the gardeners of both the houses (those of Rukayya and her sister where Nasreen had spent her last moments) by Nasreen's sisterly

the recording dev
-ture, I
-

Nasreen Mohamedi's letter to artist, Nilima Sheikh
Courtesy: Nilima Sheikh and Asia Art Archive

Nasreen Mohamedi, Nilima Sheikh and Samira Sheikh, Baroda, 1972
Courtesy: Gulammohammed Shah

KIHIM.

DEAR NILU,

THERE ARE NEW MEMORIES CONNECTED WITH YOU

IN KIHIM.

NILU IT IS AGAIN VERY BEAUTIFUL HERE.

THIS AIR HAS MADE ME FEEL MUCH BETTER. THERE ARE
ENERGIES WHICH ARE SLEEPING IN.

IT IS A GOOD FEELING WHEN THERE IS A NATURAL ORDER
ALL AROUND. THANK YOU NILU. YOU MAKE ME AWARE OF
MANY THINGS.

THE HOW. ARE YOU ALL?

SAMIRA + KABIR THE SEA WAS ASKING ABOUT YOU ALL?

I HAVE SAID THAT WE WILL COME AGAIN.

SHEIKH PLEASE SEND ME THE NAME OF A GOOD TRANSLATOR
OF THE PANCHATANTRA, FOR MY PROFESSOR IN ENGLAND. YOU
REMEMBER WE SPOKE ABOUT IT.

AM SENDING YOU LOTS + LOTS FROM HERE.

NASREEN.

C/O MR. SIKENDER III, BYRAMJI JEEJEE BHoy RD. BANDRA BOMBAY.
411050



love that they had taken upon themselves all the tasks related to her last rites before the people of the village mosque thought about it.

Driving through the village, we encountered a couple of shrines, straggly houses and dense groves. Outside a fenced settlement of government tents lay four or five scattered graves; the lines of stones enclosing each of them revealed their funereal identity. One of them was overlaid with sand and flanked by a few, tiny Champa plants. The area surrounding the graves had been swept clean, but beyond it extended the reign of wild shrubs. Farther away lay the wire fence, beyond it the seashore lined with coconut trees. Nasreen's body must have been placed in such a way that the seashore always remained in her sight, I assumed; even if it wasn't, the azure blue sky and the mesmerizing glow of white clouds were to be in the line of her vision always. When supine, it becomes difficult to see the whirling majesty of the sea, but once you are in the grave, you could always sit up and see whatever you desired. Vishnu sprinkled water on the grave, perhaps out of his concern for Nasreen's frail

body, lying under the blanket of scorched-up sand. Even I felt so and wished he poured some more water. As if reading my thoughts, Vishnu promised to come again the next day and cool up the place. Rukayya brought out a pocket-size copy of the Quran, stood in the vicinity of the grave - perhaps near Nasreen's head - and began to read silently from one of the holy chapters. I couldn't figure out what to do. I'd read the fatiha but didn't know it by heart, so, tying a handkerchief on the head, I recited whatever little of it I could remember. Then, kept standing looking blankly at the garland and flowers placed on the grave until Rukayya was done. Nilu too looked clueless. Faced with rites and rituals, we always get thrown in a quandary and behave like lost travelers. Nilu was not familiar with the nuances of Muslim customs and yet, she decided to stand beside Rukayya, ramrod straight and grave. Then, we burnt incense sticks. As Rukayya stopped reading, calls of peacocks echoed in the background. We began to walk away from the grave in gentle steps. Rukayya tenderly touched one of the stones around the grave. Nilu stood behind her before leaving, her face flushed and eyes about

to drip. Just then, an involuntary sob escaped me before I could stifle it. A vivid memory of Nasreen's quaint habit came flooding back to me: after bidding departure every time, she would invariably return to her hosts and bid goodbye again. With this thought, both of us kept standing for a while and then got into the car. As the car moved I visualized something like Nasreen's image draped in white, floating in the sky amidst the palm trees. As we moved on, a palm-sized greyish black butterfly, its wings a hypnotizing play of dots and lines, rose from the bushes and began to float alongside the car's window. I pointed it out to Nilu – she had seen it too, so big, somewhat heavy and before long, it paced ahead, flew across the windscreen and took a sudden U-turn. We both felt Nasreen had come to say goodbye once more. Through the rest of the ride, none of us spoke after the butterfly disappeared. The car drove past a small, old mosque, sprawling trees, yellow-green vegetation and a mild wind caressing them. I saw Nilu's eyes dripping. Terminally ill, even difficult at times, Nasreen belonged to her as a true friend in the city of Vadodara, as

opposed to the somewhat perverse and tiringly sentimental Gujarati middle class of our college and city at large. Rukayya offered a napkin to Nilu.

Reaching home, we set out for a walk along the beach. Unending expanse of heaving waters in front, a knife-like shore piercing into the waters on the right and mansions of magical Mumbai shining in the distance. Ebbing waters had left behind long wavy patterns of grey, light brown and yellowish white on the desolate seashore. See, Nasreen has begun to use sand for her drawing, I told Nilu. Before settling down in Vadodara, she used to paint by pouring and spreading colors; now, when her body lay perpendicular to the sea-line, she might not be able to see the sea, but whenever dew falls, her soul, wafting like cotton fluff over palm groves and the seawall will scribble linear forms over the space where the sea meets the sand.

(First published in *Shabdashrusti*,
September, 1995, 10-15)

Nasreen Mohamedi's letter to artist, Nilima Sheikh
Courtesy: Nilima Sheikh and Asia Art Archive

Nasreen Mohamedi in Fatehpur Sikri, 1970
Nasreen Mohamedi, Nilima Sheikh and P.D. Dhumal in Fatehpur Sikri, 1970
Courtesy: Gulammohammed Sheikh & Asia Art Archive

raphs, and her other
omena (among other
her, the photoes

MILU.
BY THE SEA
I CAN'T TELL YOU WHAT THIS PLACE SPACE MEANS
THE VASTNESS
AGAIN + AGAIN ONE COMES BACK TO FIND NEW MYSTERIES
WAITING TO BE SEARCHED

CHAMOIGARH.
I FELT AS IF CORBUSIER HAD BUILT + USED BUILDINGS
TO DEFINE THE VALUE OF SPACE.
AGAIN — DIFFERENT BUT IT TOOK ME BACK TO THE
HYPONOTIC FEELING AT FATEHPUR SIKRI
MILU YOUR CARD REACHED ME.
LOTS OF LOVE TO KABIR SAMIRA YOUR PARENTS + SHEIKH
+ YOU MASREEN.



Nasreen Mohamedi, Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Eruch Hakim, Mahendra Pandya,
Mansingh Chhara, Nand Katiyal and Geeta Kapur, Lalit Kala artist protest, 1971
Courtesy: Jyoti Bhatt and Asia Art Archive

Front and inside cover page of Vrishchik magazine, Year 3, Issue No. 4-5, February-March 1971-1972.
Nasreen Mohamedi's linocut featured on the cover. This issue highlighted the artists' protests against
Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives



R. N 15180 69



VRISHCHIK

Feb-March 1971-1972

Year : 3 Nos. 4 - 5

Editors

Gulen Sheikh
Bijan Kekhbar

Address

4 Residency Bungalow
University Office Compound
Baroda 2, Gujarat-INDIA.

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Finally, the draft of the new constitution of the Lalit Kala Akademi has been prepared and submitted to the Government. We hope that the much-awaited Khosla Inquiry Commission's report takes into consideration the need for change in the constitution and the Government takes a prompt action in implementing it.

We saw a protest of the National exhibition of art this year, by a number of artists who had refrained from the earlier protest and boycott of the Akademi, for some reasons. Two consecutive shows of Rejects from the National exhibition were staged in Shilpi Chakra Gallery, New Delhi to protest against the arbitrary manner of selection and a condescending report on the merits of works chosen for exhibition and for awards by the Selection Committee.

The controversy over the role of an artist-intellectual vis-a-vis the state and the society has raged high, with direct hints to Government not to interfere in the affairs of art and artist's freedom. Conflicting, even contradictory (as in the case of Marathi writer B. B. Barkar in Times weekly, 30-4-72) views have been published, while the prepared

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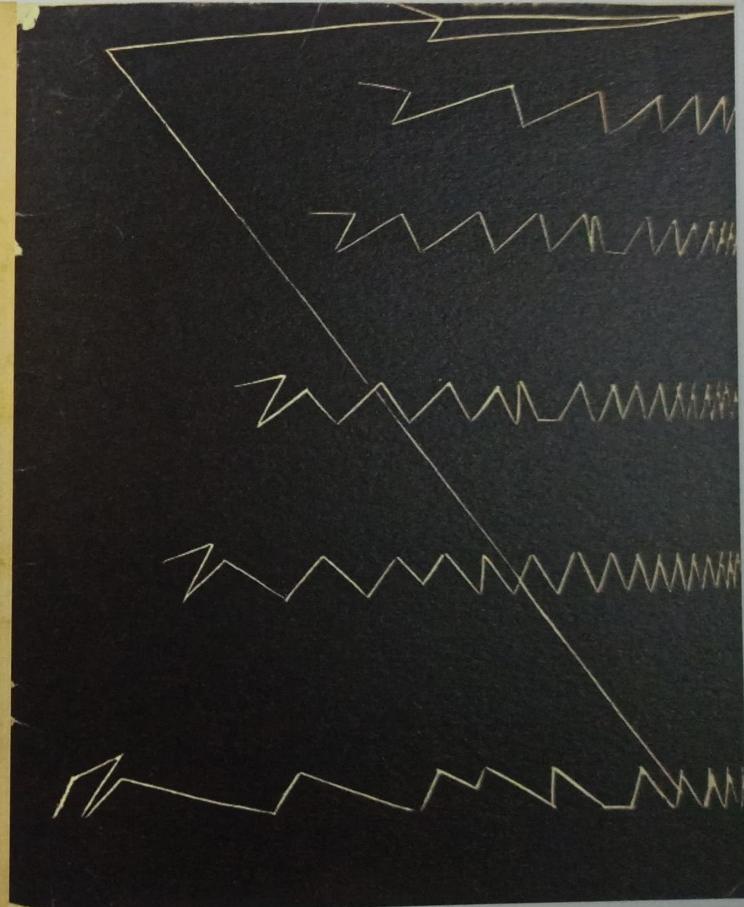
Naseem Mohamedi cover

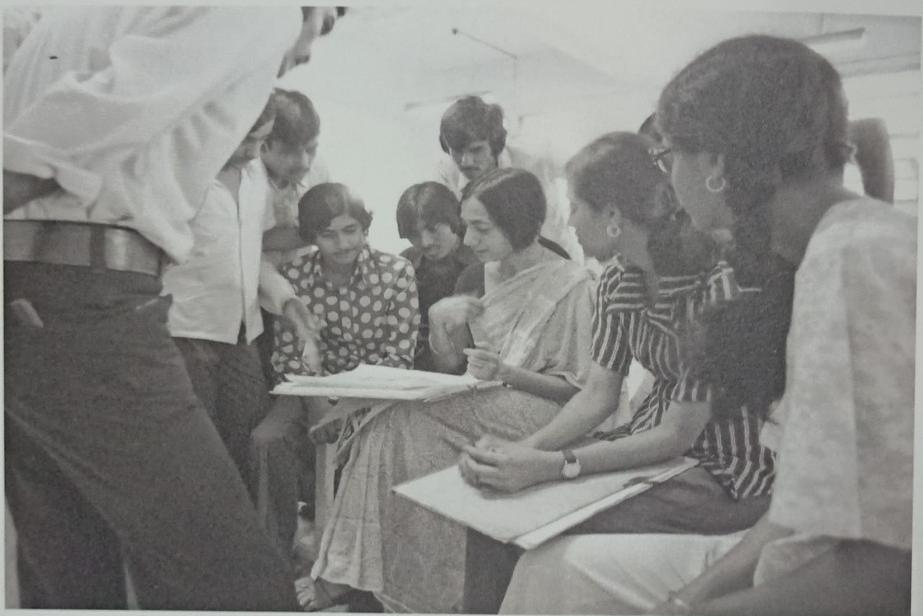
Archana Kumar

declaration at a Government-convened meeting of intellectuals at the end of recent war speaks of 'a solemn pledge to unite in a broad national cultural front' and 'consisten[ly] and principled support of freedom, humanity and justice... particularly by the Soviet Union and several socialist and other countries', the dissenting artists-writers speak of 'imposition of an ideology they partially or wholly do not support, and memories of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in reference to Soviet Union.'

Do we not know to which 'national cultural front' or what kind of non-conformism we are heading toward from all that is put in print. On the one hand, what seems to be a defensive cry of intellectuals, shelters the privilege of artistic activity under the guise of freedom and narrows it down to closed-in cell free of extra-artistic endeavours, while on the other it rings an alarm for those who would like to live and work without the dictates of the state and the society *

The physical and spiritual casualties of our time are unparalleled in history - the greatest being the war in Viet Nam. Are we equally perturbed by this catastrophe as we memorize Hungary and Czechoslovakia ?





NASREEN EVERYWHERE

SURESH B V

Recently, I joined a friend to visit a FabIndia store and looked at their range of fabrics. As I was moving along the stacked shelves, my eyes fell on one very gentle, soft, cotton malmal dupatta (scarf), with a supple print of indigo lines. I held the cloth close to my body and felt the weightlessness on my arm - as though it would slip, float in the air and disappear amid the complex movement of reflections on the window glass. My friend standing next to me asked who I was buying it for; I said - it is for Nasreen. Which Nasreen? I answered: The only Nasreen in our lives.

When I first met Nasreen, I was a boy of 18. Having just joined the college in 1979, Baroda was a new place for me, and it was challenging with the unfamiliar language and city. When I found myself struggling with words, observing Nasreen was a way of understanding her ideas

and practice. Although I learnt about her work only after some time, just the way she carried herself, always in cotton whites, greys, blacks, occasionally in green, articulating herself more often in gestures than in words became a way to experience and understand her sensibilities. Communication between us was mostly articulated in a language of gestures. Whenever I had a drawing to show her, she never said much in words. I would grasp her acknowledgement and critique from the subtle twitches of the facial muscles on her calm face and the tips of her fingers and toes. Those nimble and quiet expressions helped me grow and learn to observe everything under the sky. Often, Nasreen would be sitting like a monk, meditatively staring into the corridor of the painting department, on her favourite resting chair, observing the duet of the light and shadow on the floor. I could imagine her

Nasreen Mohamedi with students, Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU Baroda
Courtesy: Jyoti Bhatt and Asia Art Archive

drafting lines in her mind counting every millisecond of the swift movements on the ground, the wall, water, and even on our body and mind.

Her manner of teaching was never truly instructional; rather she imparted knowledge through her practice of being and living. She always wanted spaces to be clean, with no litter or mess. Often, when my classmates and I stepped into the Faculty of Fine Arts compound, Nasreen would be standing on the steps in the distance, waving her hand towards us. As soon as we made eye contact with her, she would make a sign - asking us to clear waste papers, biddis, cigarette butts, and other litter lying on the ground.

Nasreen would often invite me over to her home/studio to assist her in cutting drawing sheets with precision. The characteristic of her studio space embodied in some way a Japanese aesthetic. It was like stepping into a hall of silence. When I would walk in, I would be embarrassed to see the marks of my footsteps on the shiny, dark, cool Kota-tiled

floor, distracting from the reflection of the bare white wall, windows, ledges, and furniture. We would go straight to the washroom to wash our feet, and use a dry cloth to wipe the foot print marks.

When I moved away from Baroda and went for further studies to London, I chanced upon minimalist music and got exposed to



(Left to Right) Vinod Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, Ramesh Pandya and Nasreen Mohamedi, Faculty of Fine Art, MSU Baroda, Courtesy: Archana Choksi

compositions by Steve Reich and John Adams. Listening to their minimal notes and complex structures, made me see Nasreen's work from a different perspective. The movements and shifts in her lines reflected complex mathematical and scientific movements that would flow in the law of binary operations. When I returned to India and visited Baroda, I took the chance to share my new understanding about minimalist music with Nasreen. Unsurprisingly, she acknowledged it with a silent grin and played in turn her favourite classical music, a song by Pandit Bhimsingh Joshi. While listening, she would gesture to a gold ring on her fingers and joke that it was her engagement ring from Pandit Joshi.

Towards the end of 1990, Nasreen's physical condition was affected by a rare disease known as Chorea, and she had to retire early as a teacher. Even during this stage, she didn't stop working though. She carefully understood the dynamics of the encroached disease and calculatedly coordinated her muscular motor neurons to draw highly controlled fine lines,



even though she could not take a spoonful of food to her mouth easily. At the slightest slip, she would mutter a 'sorry' and would discard the drawing.

The qualities that Nasreen nurtured has faded from the premises of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda. At the same time, I continue to discover and reread Nasreen's perceptions through today's generation of students and the changing environments in my life.

(Left to Right) Nilima Sheikh, Vinod Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, Ramesh Pandya Gulammohammed Sheikh and Nasreen Mohamedi, Faculty of Fine Art, MSU Baroda, Courtesy: Archana Choksi

Light, the sea, geometry in nature, highways and
“present in Mohamedi's photographs, and
these phenomena (an
, the p

ARCHANA,

THESE DIFFICULT PATHS ARE THE VERY PATHS
TO TRUTH . . . TO BE FELT AS THE SAME AS JOY.

I WANTED TO SAY MUCH BUT YOU HELPED ME
TO RESTRAIN MYSELF.

YOU HAVE IT INSIDE YOU. YOUR SEARCH WILL
SPEAK TO YOU.

KALPANA KAVITHI - WHAT SHE SAID WAS BEAUTIFUL
NASREEN

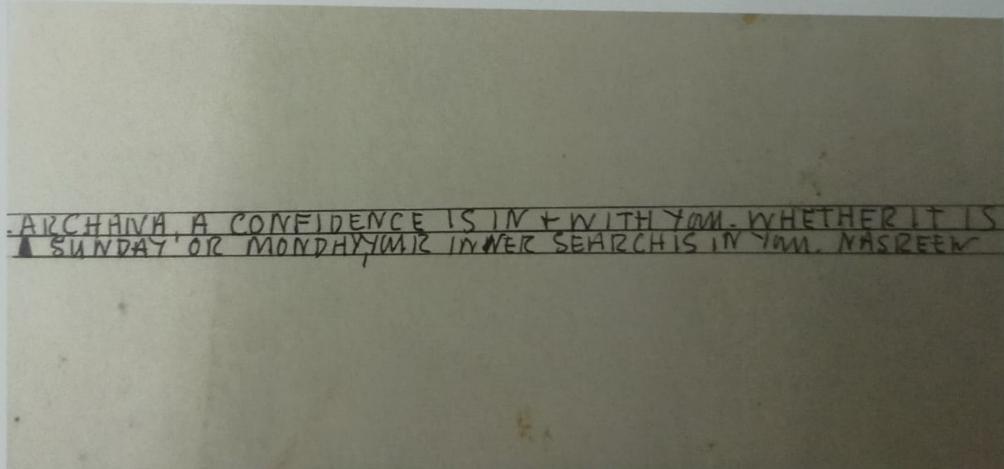
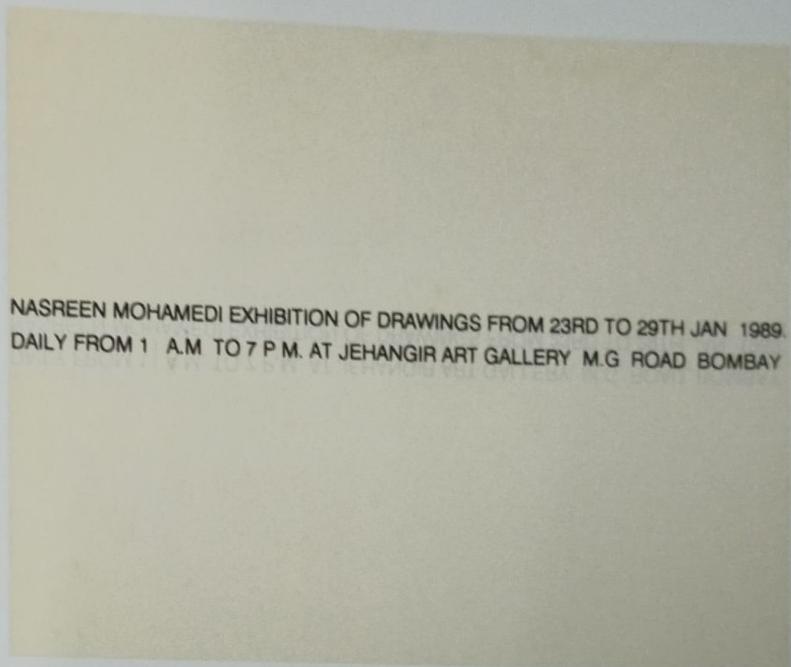


Nasreen Mohamedi's letter to her student, Archana Choksi
Courtesy: Archana Choksi

Nasreen with students (Batch of 1979-83), Faculty of Fine Art, MSU Baroda
Left to right: Archana Choksi, Kavita Shah, Swati Patel, Vasudevan
Akkitham, Shaibani Azam, Kalpana Reddy and Nasreen Mohamedi.
Courtesy: Archana Choksi

Top: Invite for Mohamedi's last exhibition before she passed away,
Jehangir Art Gallery, 1989
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari family archives

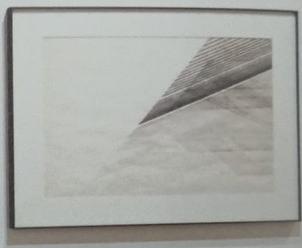
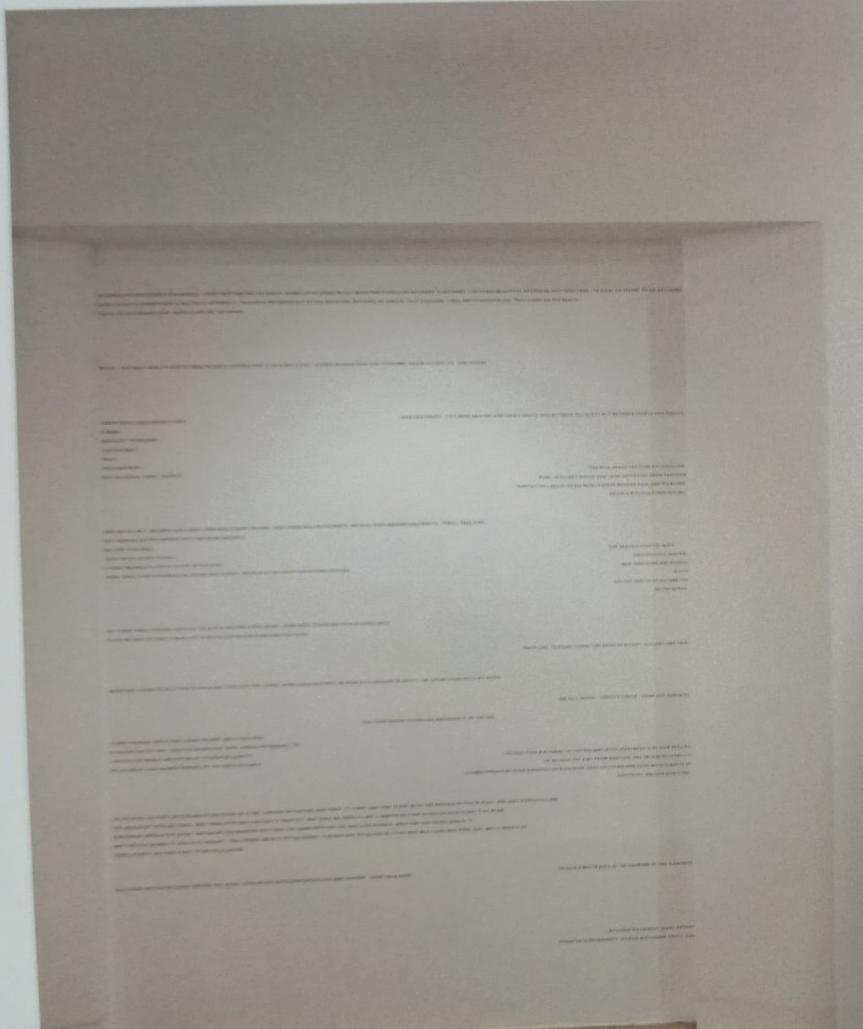
Bottom: Nasreen Mohamedi's note to her student, Archana Choksi
Courtesy: Archana Choksi







OUT OF THESE CONCENTRATED DIFFICULTIES, FRUSTRATIONS AND DESPAIR ONE ARRIVES AT SOMETHING VERY SIMPLE. IT IS ALSO EFFORT AND REPEATED EFFORT.



TO FACE A WHITE WALL IS THE COURAGE OF THE ELEMENTS.

- JUNE, 1970, NEPAL

THE NEW IMAGE FOR PURE RATIONALISM.

PURE INTELLECT WHICH HAS TO BE SEPARATED FROM EMOTION -
WHICH I JUST BEGIN TO SEE NOW.

A STATE BEYOND PAIN AND PLEASURE. AGAIN A DIFFICULT TASK BEGINS.

- MAY 22, CA. EARLY 1960S

EACH LINE, TEXTURE (FORM) ARE BORN OF EFFORT, HISTORY AND PAIN.

- JULY 20, 1971, DELHI

FIRE

HOW TO READ AIR

OPTICAL AIR

NOT THE ACTUAL SOUND

SEE AND FEEL PRIMEVAL ORDER

TO GET OUT OF BEAUTIFUL SOUND

- JULY 17, 1973, BARODA

THE SEA INTERSECTED WITH

CALLIGRAPHY (SOUND)

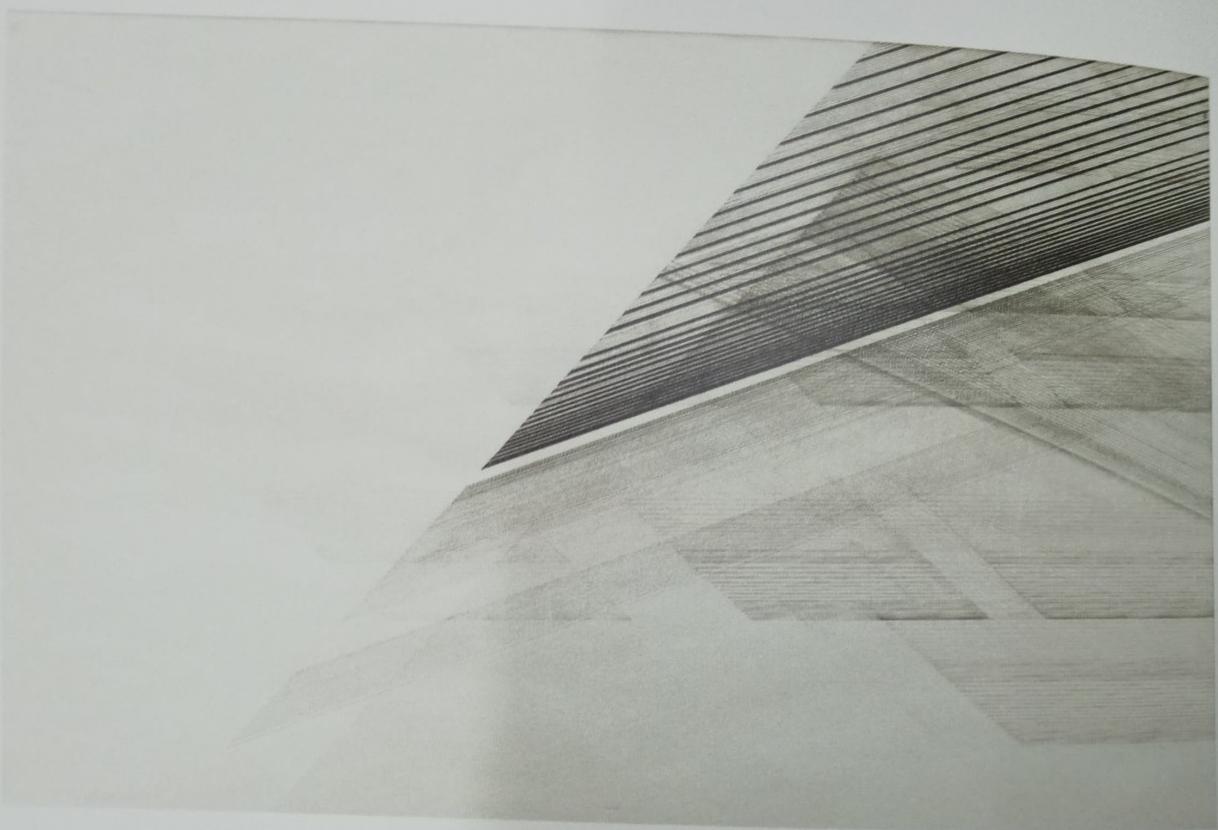
NEW HORIZONS ARE NEEDED

IN LIFE

ALL THE FORCES OF NATURE ARE

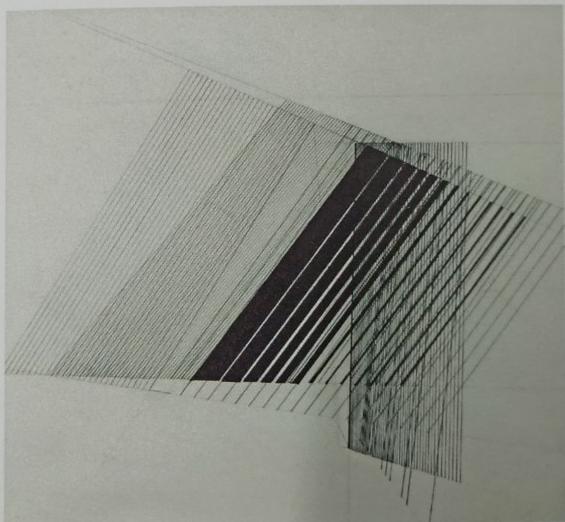
INTERTWINED.

- APRIL 30, 1969, BAHRAIN

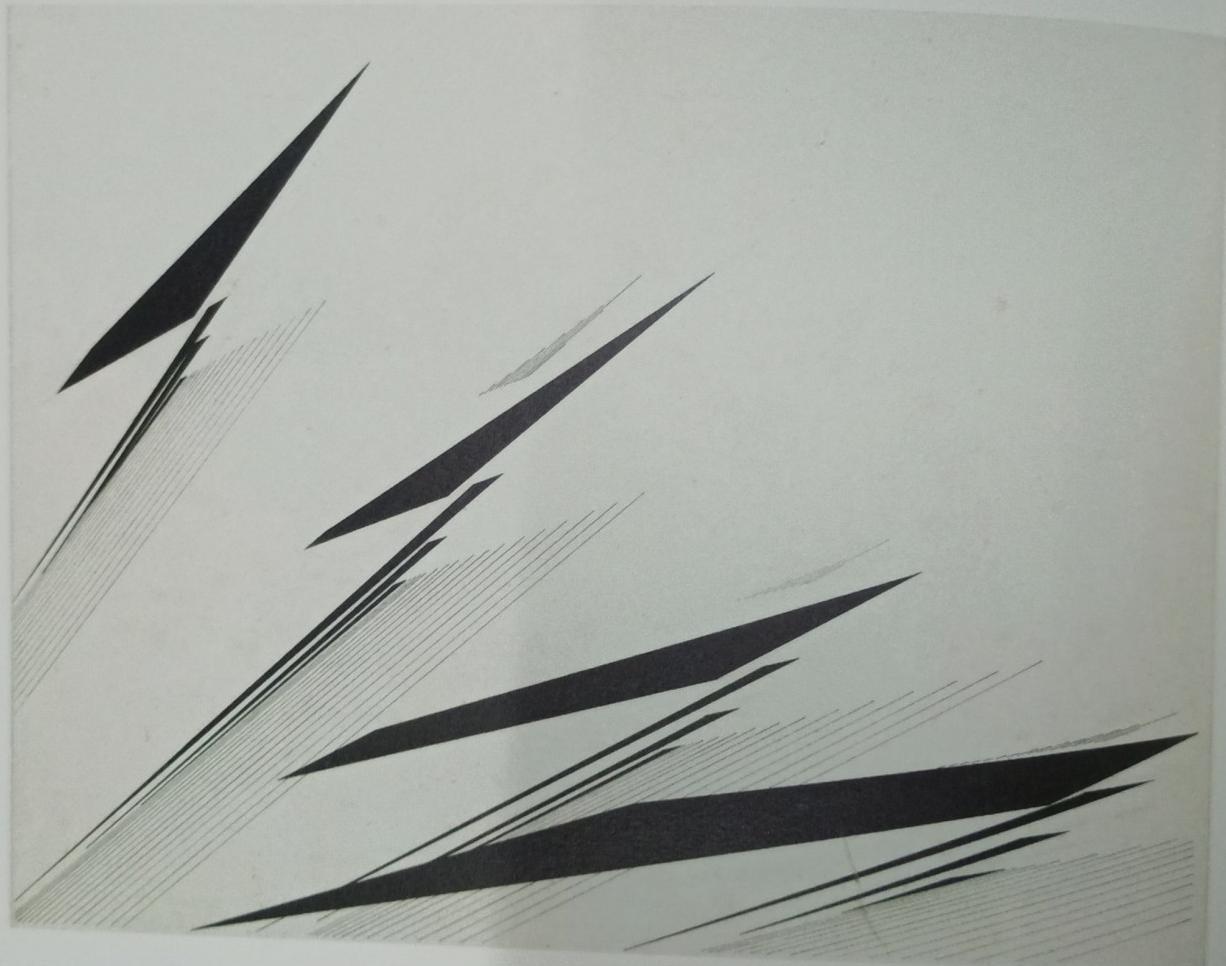


Left: Untitled, ink on paper, ca. 1975 - 80, 20 x 28 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari

Right: Untitled, ca. 1975 – 1980s, ink on paper, 7 x 7 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



Untitled, ca. 1975 – 1980s, ink on paper board, 20 x 28 in
Collection: Sikander and Hydari



ALL THESE LINES, CIRCLES, DOTS ON THE BEACH ARE FOR A FEW HOURS- EVEN THEN CHANGING EACH MOMENT WITH
THE WIND AND ITS OWN DURABILITY TO REACH FURTHER DESIGNS AND DESTINIES.
. MAY 13, 1968, KIHIM

OUT OF THESE CONCENTRATED DIFFICULTIES, FRUSTRATIONS AND DESPAIR ONE
ARRIVES AT SOMETHING VERY SIMPLE. IT IS ALSO EFFORT AND REPEATED EFFORT.

- APRIL, 1967

IN THE MIDST OF THESE ARID SILENCES ONE PICKS UP A FEW THREADS OF TEXTURE AND FORM. IT IS NOT THAT ONE
IS NOT WITH THE RHYTHM OF THE FAIR BUT ONE DIGS DEEPER TO FIND
THE ORIGIN OF THESE RHYTHMS. ONLY THEN DOES ONE FIND ONE'S IDENTITY - NOT ONLY AN IDENTITY BUT
A DEEPER RHYTHM WHICH ENGULFS EVERY TINY ATOM.

ONE CAN BE ABSOLUTELY SILENT AND SHARE THE
DANCING RHYTHMS. THE SAME RHYTHMS SEE THROUGH DESPAIR. ONLY ONE HAS TO RECOGNISE IT.

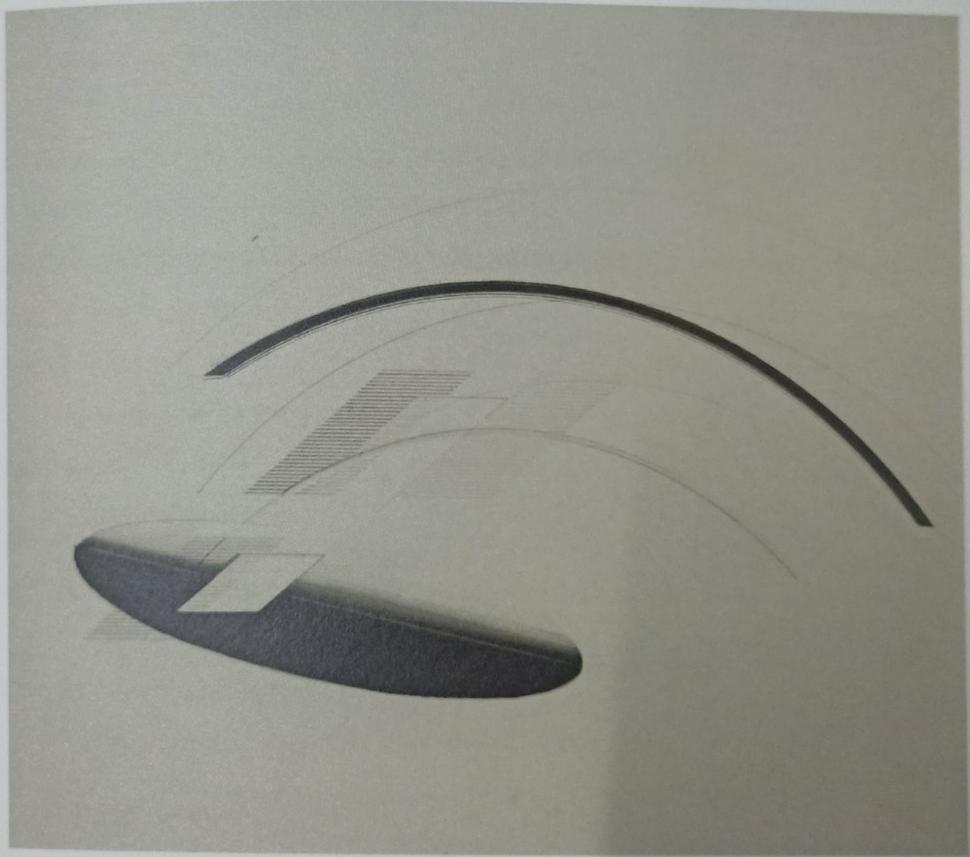
WAITING ONE LEARNS TO WATCH ITS WEIGHT - THE STRONG ARIDITY OF THE DESERT.
IT MAKES ONE DETACHED IN A TINY WAY IN A CLEAR AND VITAL WAY. NOT A DEARTH OF COMPLACENCY.
WAITING IS A PART OF INTENSE LIVING.

- MARCH 12, 1971, BARODA

Left: Untitled, ca. late 1980s, ink and graphite on paper, 10.25 x 13.31 in
Private Collection

Right: Untitled, ca. late 1980s, ink and graphite on paper, 10.5 x 13.5 in
Collection: Dossal Family





WATCHING THE ELECTRICIANS TAPPING THE WIRES - STRAINS BETWEEN CONCENTRATION

AND DANGER - HUNG ON A ROPE

- JULY 17, 1971

THE CONTINUOUS CHANGING MONOLOGUE OF THE SEA.

- 1971, DELHI

TO FACE EVEN A MOMENT OF THE PRESENT WITH STARKNESS IS TO FACE REALITY.

TO REMOVE THE DIRT FROM EMOTION AND RETAIN ITS VITALITY.

JUGNUS SPREADING OVER EXPANSES OF DARKNESS. VAST SWEEPING HORIZONS WITH FLASHES OF LIGHTNING.
BROKEN HORIZONS.

- SEPTEMBER 23, BARODA TO DELHI

NOTHINGNESS AND AGAIN NOTHINGNESS. THOSE PATTERNS ON THE BEACH.

THOSE LITTLE CRABS WHICH MAKE THOSE ENDLESS PATTERNS. SOMETHING LIKE THOSE BEAUTIFUL DRAPERY AND
TAPESTRIES. TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO DO ANYTHING SEEMS SO FUTILE. EVERYTHING IN NATURE IS SO PERFECT.

TO COPY IS OF COURSE OUT OF THE QUESTION, BUT EVEN TO CREATE - IS IT CREATION.

I FEEL EMPTY AND USELESS. THAT LIGHT ON THE BEACH.

THOSE ZIG ZAG DESIGNS THAT WAVES LEAVE ON THE SANDS.

- NOVEMBER 3, 1959

MY LINES SPEAK OF TROUBLED DESTINIES

- JUNE 3, 1968, ON A TRAIN FROM BARODA

CALLIGRAPHY ON SWORD
JADE, LIGHT GREENS, BLUES WHAT TRANSPARENCY
CUT OUT WORK IN METAL
UNCUT EMERALDS

SPACE IN TURKISH MINIATURE IS QUITE DIFFERENT
INSPIRE OF THE SAME FORM SOMETIMES
MINIATURE - A PINK GREY MAP - A COLD BALANCE
RUNS THROUGH THESE - AT MOMENTS A SURREALISM

A SEMI TRANSPARENT HUE IN JADE
TOPKAPI
STRANGE PLANTS IN TOPKAPI
WHERE THEY STAND IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RARITIES
AND THE ATMOSPHERE AROUND
- OCTOBER 4, 1968, TOPKAPI

LIVE SIMPLY WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ALL IS CHANGE -
THUS SO INTERESTING AND WITTILY ALIVE

AT TIMES FRIGHTENING - THROWING ONE INTO THE ABYSS -

THE ABYSS IS IMPORTANT

- MAY 13, 1968, KIHIM

Mohamedi family portrait

(left to right) Back: Camar, Saleha, Rukaya (sisters)

Front: Anwar (brother), Akhtar (brother-in-law), Zainab (mother), Ashraf (father), Vazir (sister), Shams (brother) with Nasreen aged four

Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari Family Archives



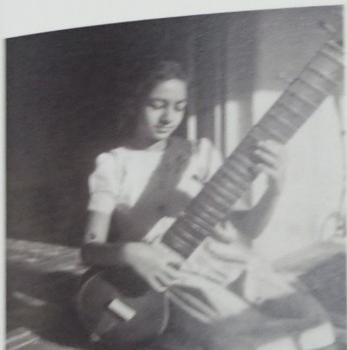
Left to right:

Naseem Mohamedi, Bandra, Mumbai

Mohamedi with her sister, Saleha, 1950

Mohamedi with her brother, Altaf

Courtesy: Sikander & Hyder Family Archives







Stills from home videos featuring travels including Kihim, Bahrain, Egypt & Mohamedi's family Kodak pop-up store in Kuwait.
Source: Shamsuddin Mohamedi

MUSIC - ABSTRACT QUALITY AND YET REAL TO SUCH A DEGREE THAT IT IS ALMOST LIFE.

- FEBRUARY 17, 1960

WALKING AMONG VAST SPACES - SPACE FILLED WITH INTRICATE FORMS,
LINES ARRIVING FILLED WITH VARIOUS TEXTURES, FOOT STEPS INSIDE FEET

LINES ARRIVING AND RECEDING INTO LOST SPACE - THE HORIZONS KEEPING
THE LIMITLESS IN LIMITS - ALL FORMING A WHOLE.

- JANUARY 11, 1968

LABYRINTHS, LINES AMONG LINES -

A MESH

DIFFICULT TO DESTROY

YET ONE MUST

WALK

NOTHING MORE

OUT OF CHAOS, FORM - SILENCE.

- MARCH, 1968

THE FULL MOON - PERFECT CIRCLE - COMPLETE SERENITY.

- JULY 10, DELHI

ONE DAY ALL WILL BECOME FUNCTIONAL AND HENCE GOOD DESIGN. THEN THERE WILL BE NO WASTE.

WE WILL THEN UNDERSTAND BASICS. IT WILL TAKE TIME.

BUT THEN WE GET THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PURE PATIENCE.

NATURE IS SO TRUE.

SUCH TRUTH IN HER SILENCE.

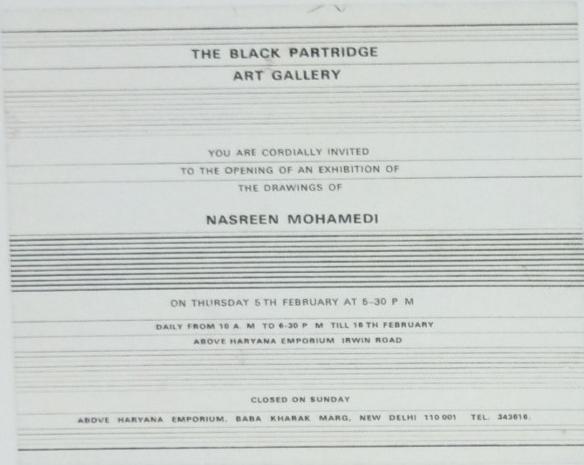
IF ONLY WE WOULD LISTEN TO HER INTRICACIES.

THEN THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE IN SOUND AND VISION. THERE MUST BE SPACE FAR BEYOND LOGICAL

- 1980



Nasreen Mohamedi at Kihim beach, Maharashtra
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari Family archives



EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS

NASREEN MOHAMED

Bth Jan 82 5 30 PM Urja Art Ga ery Baroda
on view t il 10th Jan 4 30 to 7 30 PM daily

Press clippings and exhibition invites found at Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydari Family Archives

四

बसरीन का प्रतिष्ठाने लोक

नवारीन : कलाकार

नरपति अवै तिर्यका द्वारा बाटी
नरपति द्वारा को बाटी
उसी द्वारा को बाटी ताक बाटी द्वारा
को बाटी वह नरपति-वाला-बालाका के
बीच जाना-यार जाना है। दोस्री रो दूस्री
द्वारा की विशेषता वह है कि दोस्री के बाप-बाप
निकाल आया है औ उसी बाप के बाप को भी है।
बाप-बाप आया है औ उसी सोलह बाबा वाली
है जो अपनी-अपनी कुंड का बाप है। बाप
की बात के बाबों को भी रहे ही दोस्री
द्वारा है।

दो-एक चिह्नों से इसे बीजू-दूर्दूरे रो
के दृष्टि में ही—यारी का बासन बाल
को बाप-बाप के बीच लाने का एक समाज व्यवस्था
में सुनिक करता है। यह नियम के बिच दोस्री गई
अपनी पौत्रों के बापों को आगे लेते ही
विव देने वाले इन दूसरी रो की सुनिक
करता है।

महाराष्ट्र : एक इतिहास

विजयालय

... और उस की तृती



President Mr Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, giving away the national awards for arts to Nureem Mohamed at Rabindra Bhawan in New Delhi on Saturday.—Express photo

Mausi
chami.

An estimated
expected to take place in the
Sangam on the Mauni Amavasya
Day (January 19), 5,000,000 on
Basant Panchmi Day (January 24).
—Samachar.

Awards for painters, sculptors

NEW DELHI, September 29: Seven
painters and sculptors have been given
national awards for their works by
the Lalit Kala Akademi.

The winners are Amitava Das for
his painting "Red Cloud", Prabhalak Barwe for his painting, "Blue Cloud",
Amrut Patel for his painting, "Passing I", Miss Nasreen Thammadi for
her drawing, "Drawing I", Gurcharan
Singh for his drawing, "Drawing V",
Miss Mrinalini Mukerji for her sculpture,
"Amaltash Sapling", and Nagji
Patel for his sculpture, "Pink bust."

The 20th national exhibition of
art, organised by the Lalit Kala Akademi,
will be inaugurated by President
Ahmed on October 16, according
to an akademi release.

One hundred and sixty-nine paint-
ings, 65 graphics and drawings and
36 sculptures by 197 artists have been
selected for the exhibition from
among 1,598 entries of 794 artists
after a three-day screening by a jury
headed by Mr. Swaminathan and
with Mr. Jeram Patel and Mr. Krishen
Khanna as members.—Samachar.

Bank to give loans to budding writers

By The
Express

Humming discs: The Art Of Nasreen

By GEETA KAPUR

Beyond any other Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi has worked at the principle of abstraction, devolving processes of nature and art to their point of inception where there is absolute poverty of means. The metaphysical inclinations within modernist art have been linked to the oriental coordinates in Sufi poetics and Zen. This takes her further in the economy of accommodating ends to means; it also gives her the courage to abolish contradictions such as between virtuousness and innocence, language and nonsense, wisdom and lunacy. The contradictions are pierced and strung together by the archer's arrow. To shoot the arrow Nasreen has prepared herself by ordering her space and the object world within it, and by a painful evacuation of her subjectivity which leaves her body shuddering. She has prepared herself through ritual and above all through practice. The immediate evidence of her monk-life practice is in her little graph sketches which we are privileged to see along with the larger more remote and majestic drawings.

About 15 years ago, in the early seventies, Nasreen made a definite shift from her earlier, nature-bound paintings to more strictly abstract drawings. At the time of the shift her oils had already become *all surface*. They were monochromatic, with delicate ground markings as of wavelets, dead grass and insect legs on the pale, refined element of sand. Indeed, the lyric mode was directly associated with landscapes on the outlying shores of Bombay where she has spent weeks and months since childhood; and with the deserts of Arabia, her chosen place of origin, where nature is undifferentiated like the face of eternity and yet entirely impressionable, criss-crossed with invisible currents of air.

Ink Drawings

When Nasreen moved on to making small ink drawings both the monotony of her chosen landscapes and their rhythms were formally registered in plain graph-like grids. The drawings consisted of an overall schema of horizontal and vertical lines with a semblance of markings as before but even more neutral, like light percussion punctuating a set scale. The drawings were a variation in grey, a closely worked plus and minus of a uniform tone. Nothing more.

is a sustained value not an embossed claim. But I mention Nasreen's inside-outside position with contemporary international art also to make a substantive point regarding her work. Taschisme may be seen to be related to minimal and conceptual art in that the autonomous mark is complemented by its opposite, the code, which resembles a self-referencing mathematical composition, and the code in turn with the extrapolated idea that is a work of art. Thus in a sense Henri Michaux, Agnes Martin and, say, Carl Andre establish a symmetrical relationship with one another. Between matter or the physical mark the artist makes; form in its transcendent definition; and the concept whereby art is tautologically re-defined, there is something like a triangular connection.

Nasreen, though she is related to some of these traditions, remains attached to a perceptual position. Perception paradoxically of imagined phenomena, like a mirage or an epiphany, with a structural delicacy necessary to elicit the fugitive sensation. Ever since she abolished direct reference to nature and suppressed the lyric feeling she has, I believe, worked at a notation to transfigure desire. And I say this in full recognition of the fact that this may seem to stand in contradiction with all the ways in which I have hitherto described her — as paring down her subjectivity and surrendering her expression. It is perhaps a contradiction but of the kind that can have viability. When desire exceeds human capacities the ego and its instrumentalities like language may come to be surrendered but with the conviction that poorer the means, the more acute the sensation they command.

And what are her means? The line shoots from the point, breaks and then starts again along another plane; or it reverses its track enclosing a wide triangle. A thin band of lines meets another set in a perpendicular intersection making two tilted planes. The planes though entirely graphic, look like screens of faint grey light, and by virtue of the illusory tone they vibrate.

Formally the drawings are a demonstration of how space breaks into planes, how these delineated planes are graded, tilted, weighted — to balance space. The drawings display space as infinity: How it may surface, full-flank or as negative cut-outs in

more.

In the next phase, in the late seventies, the scale of the drawings enlarged and she set the designs at an angle to the rectangular format introducing steep trajectories in space. From then to now, Nasreen's purpose is to signify space as an impenetrable surface, as sheer dimensionality; and as the element which encourages movement, ascension.

Geometric abstraction may be a prefiguration of a material form, its first notation. On the other hand, it may be the embedded element of form, the luminous schema that may, by a delicate manouevre, be detached from its material life and set afloat above the natural ground. In the way Nasreen's work has developed, I believe that she has been learning to release the catch.

The drawings are then transcendent in that the reference to earth, to topography, base line and horizon are minimal. But they are transcendent in a measured and measurable sense: they lift themselves above the ground which is thus visually oblique but remains a referent, always signified by the levitating grid.

Conceptual Art

A few points here about the international art context in which Nasreen's work should be seen. Given the history of abstract art, Nasreen is positioned at the conjunction of minimal and conceptual art, beside an artist like Agnes Martin. Since the last few decades, women artists may be seen to have been especially advanced in developing the relationship between the idea of infinite and its design, achieving succinct transpositions precisely such as those by Agnes Martin. The value of this position was somewhat pushed about in formalist rhetoric and its rebuttals. Today, when the image and gesture of the 'new wild' have brought about a more machismo aesthetic, the value is clearer. Of course, Nasreen has been relatively safe in her hermit's hut because there are no hurricane movements in Indian art and not many raging ambitions. But she is unique nevertheless because in India there are other dangers of being overrun on the contrary by lyric effusions. Nasreen, the lyricist, has rigorously whittled down expression like a hermit whittles down his visible self to a mere sign.

But further apropos international art, though she was dedicated once to the *mark* Nasreen was never the proper taschiste just as she is not today a minimalist or conceptual artist. I say this in continuation of the observation above that there are no pronounced and successive movements in Indian art so that the uniqueness of an artist like Nasreen is

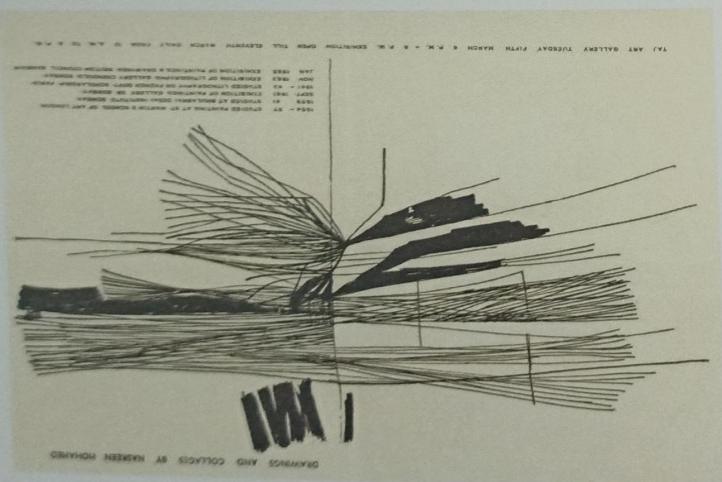
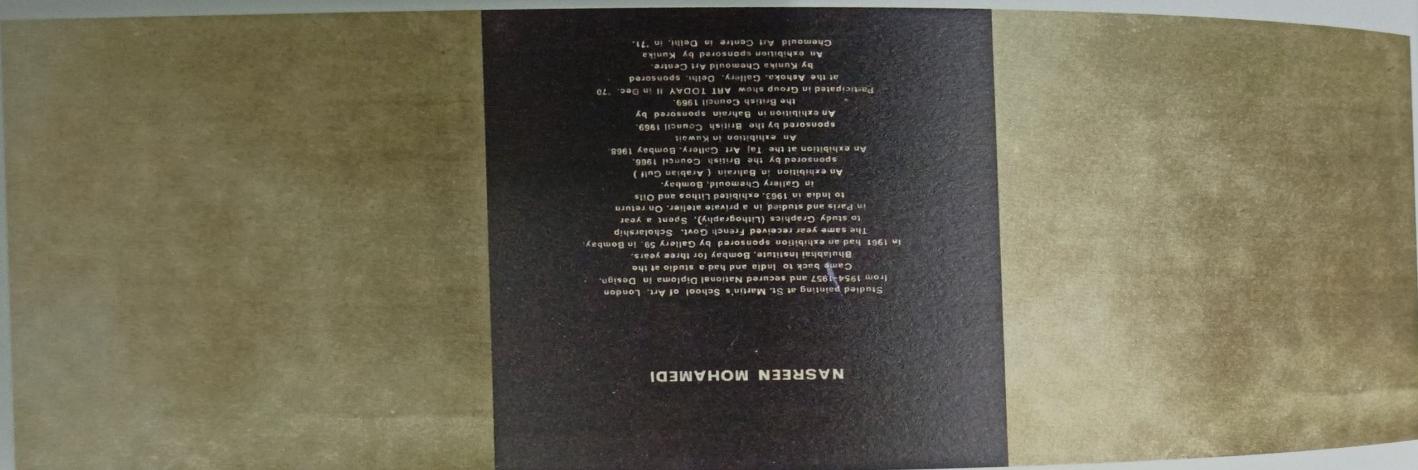
full-flank or as negative cut-outs in the shape of arrowheads floating above the surface of the paper. They display infinity in terms of movement — infinity lifting a wing to take a turn! Or as a summation of continual, subliminal movement of deftly disaligned, vastly outstretched wings.

Chorded Scale

There is a monotonic thrumming on the chorded scale which constitute the drawings: Sometimes a dart — a single, double or triple note — pierces the scale. It is the absent note in the intersections of a harmony, a chaste note, but as if it were in the nature of all formal displacements, the sigma is revealed.

All graphic notation, all formal delineation has a calligraphic aspect. Islamic calligraphy, superior to all comparable forms, is like the body of the supplicant in a state of grace. Exquisitely stylish and evanescent, calligraphy can grow into the arabesque which playfully speaking, becomes the curving track in the heavenly orbit. Nasreen's most recent work is not in fact calligraphic, but it has more than ever before the qualities of angelic flight. An ellipse set afloat like a humming disc, the image is what the winging body of an angel might imaginably be, a sounding board in relation to our own body. Sparse, almost empty, these drawings are little fields of light against which the aspiring body throws a faint shadow.

(The author is an eminent art critic. She has just completed a monograph on K.G. Subramanyam. The article has been written on the occasion of a major exhibition of Nasreen Mohamedi's drawings at the Art Hermitage Gallery in New Delhi.)



Nasreen's show mainly for artists

By Our Art Critic

It is surprising to find how the right environment enhances the emotional appeal of pictures.

The 'One-Man Show' by Kumari Nasreen Mohamedi at Gallery Chemould currently on view is an example of such a happy concurrence.

What strikes one most is the restraint exercised by the artist. Like a consummate bridge-player, Nasreen has exposed her suit just enough to convey the great strength of her unexposed holding!

Most of the exhibits on display are monochrome lithographs. This medium has a restricted gamut unlike oils or watercolours. Within this limited field however, the artist has eminently succeeded in evincing her sense of "colour"—colour which is often missed in works where it is actually employed.

SPRING-BOARDS

Are they abstracts? Perhaps yes, with our labelled classification of art. But they do evoke an imagery in the minds of the spectator. They almost serve as spring-boards for anyone who wants to jump into the world of forms and images. Each one can indulge in one's mental variation of the theme put forth by the artist. In fact this is an exhibition mainly for the artist—who could enjoy it—and could identify through these works his own expression by constant mental comparison of what he sees and what he would like to do himself.

One cannot help feeling, after visiting this exhibition, that this for once is a show which imparts a great sense of harmony. It does set a standard many a young painter would do well to emulate, particularly in its discreet all-round presentation—just enough, but with conviction and care.

The exhibition, which was scheduled to close on Monday, is now extended upto Thursday and is open daily from 10.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Second Show Of Nasreen

LITHOGRAPHS AND GOUACHES

By NISSIM EZEKIEL

At Gallery Chemould, Bombay's Nasreen Mohamedi exhibits her work for the second time, the first since her return to India recently. A former student of the St. Martin's School of Art, London, Nasreen spent a year in Paris on a French Government scholarship.

She chose to utilize it in the study of Lithography. Except for one large oil, which makes the viewer wonder more by this artist in the same medium, and five abstract water-colours, the exhibition is of lithographs created in Paris.

They reveal, on the whole, a delicate, poetic sensibility and conscious literary taste. Some are obviously landscapes, bathed in soft light and somewhat, if so allowed, a word is permissible in this context, by a quiet play of shadows. Others are scaled structures, with a radiance in grey tones, or an organisation of masses in black and grey. These masses resemble coloured cardboard rather than stone.

The structures have the true beauty of illustrations in chemistry or botany text-books, suggesting mysterious phenomena captured by a powerful instrument; in this case, the artist's imagination. The streaks of white, which actually constitute the thick paper showing through, are particularly effective.

This device is also used in the water colours. Lithographs 3, 4 and 5 are examples of the use of black and grey masses. No. 3 is a typical naked structure (I don't know what else I can call it.) In both these types, one feels a certain austerity of form which is restricting rather than inspiring.

A lithograph like No. 7 suggests larger possibilities, but it appears that Nasreen is unwilling or unable to make bold, fully expressive gestures in her lithographs. The water colours are superior in this respect. They seem complete and spontaneous improvisations, with clearer rhythms and a more lyrical charm.

The single oil painting is the best of all. It uses a range of luminous greens to depict land, sky, water and houses, even if "depict" is the wrong word for the artist's intention. A number of Nasreen's oil paintings would be worth waiting for, should there be any prospect of it.

The exhibition is open from 10.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. till November 25.

Press clippings found at Nasreen Mohamedi's Baroda studio
Courtesy: Sikander & Hydri Family Archives

FINANCIAL EXPRESS D/- 24th November, 1963

NASREEN MOHAMEDI

Gallery Chemould which makes the best of the small space available on the first floor of the Jehangir Art Gallery presents this week Nasreen Mohamedi's works. A majority of these are lithographs which when you look at them with full awareness of the process involved impress you with their spontaneity and visual lyricism. It is the Artist's job to suggest — and merely to suggest — aspects of landscape or rather the fundamental reality of natural phenomena through subtlety of texture. Thus what is imbibed from nature is returned to nature transformed with the help of whatever ~~the~~ line tone and granular flourish can give it. This is a show for the discerning for there is no objective term of reference for the visual pleasure one derives from it.

Gallery Chemould incidentally establishes the status and utility of a "little gallery" which like a ~~tiny~~ little magazine can take upon itself the education of the intelligentsia. Grooming the avant garde artist for appreciation by a select audience, this little gallery can then pass the fish from the small tank to the bigger ones. This is in some ways a thankless task but one believes that the sponsors of Gallery Chemould realize this.



BIOGRAPHY



Nasreen Mohamedi (1937 - 1990) was born in Karachi in pre-Partition India, to a progressive Suleimani Bohra family. Mohamedi was one of 8 siblings. In 1944, after Mohamedi's mother passed away, her father moved the family to Mumbai. She studied at St. Joseph's Convent, Bandra. At age 17, Mohamedi went to the Saint Martin's School of Art in London for a Diploma in design. From 1957-58, Mohamedi lived in Bahrain where her father had a flourishing business, Ashraf's, which traded in Japanese photography equipment.

Between 1959 -1961, Mohamedi held a studio space at the Bhulabhai Institute where she was acquainted with many of Mumbai's leading artists. In 1961, Mohamedi had her first exhibition at Bal Chhabda's 'Gallery 59' situated in Bhulabhai Institute. She was awarded a French Government scholarship to Paris to study at Monsieur Guillard's private atelier from 1961-63.

In 1970, Mohamedi moved to Nizamuddin East in Delhi.

In 1972, she joined the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, as a teacher for drawing. Mohamedi continued to live and teach in Baroda till 1988, after which she returned to Mumbai. She passed away in Kihim, Alibaug on 14th May 1990 after a long battle with Huntington's Chorea.

In the absence of exact dates and titles, Mohamedi's works are usually categorised into periods that mark shifts in her practice. Her referential sketches of nature from the mid-1950s- early 1960s; then a phase where the image is stripped of recognizable references from mid-1960s - early 70s including the grid-template works; followed by the period of her unique pen and ink line works for which she is most known for.

During her lifetime, Mohamedi held several exhibitions of her work: at Gallery 59 (1961), Gallery Chemould (1963); British Council, Bahrain (1966, 1969); Taj Art Gallery (1968); Lalit Kala Academi (1970, 1977); Kunika Chemould, Delhi (1971-72); Third Triennale in

New Delhi (1975); Jehangir Art Gallery (1974, 1977, 1989); Black Partridge, Delhi (1976); Shridharani Art Gallery, Delhi (1981); Urja Art Gallery, Baroda (1982); Prithvi Art Gallery, Mumbai (1982); Festival of India, London (1982); Indian Artists in France, Paris (1985); Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi (1987). She was awarded the Lalit Kala National Award in Drawing in 1976.

After Mohamedi's death, her first retrospective was organised by her family and friends at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai. In recent times, her works have gained word-wide recognition and major retrospectives have been held at The Drawing Center, New York (2005); Office for Contemporary Art, Norway (2009); Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2013); Tate, Liverpool (2014); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2015); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2016). Her works were shown at 'Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing' (Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 2000) and Documenta XII (Kassel, 2007).



Untitled, ca. 1960s, ink and watercolour on paper, 14.5 x 18 in
Collection: Dossal Family

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The condition assessment and conservation for the
works displayed in the exhibition were done under the
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Project



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NASREEN MOHAMEDI: THE VASTNESS, AGAIN & AGAIN

CURATED BY PUJA VAISH

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Trustees: Cyrus Guzder and Kaiwan Kalyaniwalla

Advisory Board: Ranjit Hoskote and Dadiba Pundole

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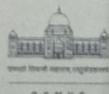
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2nd Floor, East Wing, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya,
159/161, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai - 400023

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101
— YEARS —
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